

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lesbian Romances

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, February 17th, 2021

I was intrigued by two movies about lesbian romances in the 19th century: *Ammonite* (2020) directed by Frances Lee, and *The World to Come* (2021) by Mona Fastvold. So I reflected back on another movie I had volunteered to review for the Golden Globes website, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), a French film by Céline Sciamma, and the British miniseries *Gentleman Jack* (2019) created by Sally Wainwright. (click on titles for trailers) Having interviewed most of the creators of these artistic works, the directors and the actresses, I share some quotes.



Portrait of a Lady on Fire-Noémie Merlant, Adèle Haenel © Lilies Films

Portrait of a Lady on Fire (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*) is about Marianne (Noémie Merlant), a painter teaching an art class in Paris, reminiscing about the time when, in 1770, she was commissioned to paint the portrait of a young girl, Héloïse (Adèle Haenel), living on an island off the coast of Brittany, who had been promised in marriage to a Milanese nobleman by her mother, an Italian countess (Valeria Golino).

Director Sciamma says, “The story is not an adaptation of a book or a historical fact, but actually there were over one hundred women painters in that particular moment of art history, in France,

Europe and everywhere, and they had very successful careers. I knew only about a few of them, like [Artemisia Gentileschi](#), [Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun](#), [Vigée](#), [Angelica Kauffman](#).” About the love that blossoms between these two women, “Even though they knew their lives were marked out in advance, and they lived in a world that forbid their desires, they were curious, intelligent and wanted to love.”



Ammonite-Saoirse Ronan, Kate Winslet (c) Agatha Nitecka

Ammonite (the title refers to a type of [fossil](#), a ribbed spiral-form shell) is based on real people and events. [Mary Anning](#) (Kate Winslet), a working class Englishwoman born in 1799, who dug up ancient fossils on the coast of Lyme Regis in Southern England, and was only posthumously recognized as a leading paleontologist. [Charlotte Murchison](#) (Saoirse Ronan), a geologist with a gift for drawing who was entrusted to Mary’s care by her husband, to recuperate after the loss of a child. [Elizabeth Philpot](#) (Fiona Shaw), a fossil collector who mentored and befriended young Mary. British director Frances Lee says, “Given that Mary lived in this patriarchal society, where men had appropriated her work for themselves and she had gotten no recognition, and, because in this period men owned women, I wanted to give her an imagined intimate relationship that felt equal and respectful, so with a woman not with a man.” About Charlotte, “She had been brought up in a society where her father owned her, then she was passed on to another man, her husband, and the expectations of her were virtually nothing, apart from dressing the right way, saying the right things and producing children. So to see her transformation to becoming an individual in her own right felt very powerful to me.”

Saoirse Ronan says, “Mary and Charlotte don’t really expect anything of one another, there’s no labeling within the relationship. So they’re given this time and space to be whoever they want to be, and out of that comes along care and healing for both of them.”

Kate Winslet says, “We were able to access a lot of historical letters written between women from 1780 to 1840, and all of them were married to men, but they had these friendships with women, where they formed bonds of sisterhood that became long lasting, deep, connected, romantic, sexual, passionate relationships, which were deeply intimate and very detailed in these wonderful

letters.”



World to Come-Katherine Waterstone, Vanessa Kirby (c) Vlad Cioplea

The World to Come is a fictional frontier romance between two married women, Abigail (Katherine Waterstone), the narrator, and Tallie (Vanessa Kirby), her neighbor, who live in isolated farms in rural Upstate New York in the 1850s.

Norwegian director Mona Fastvold, says, “The film is based on a short story by Jim Shepard inspired by a line he came across in an old farm journal, scribbled in the margins, ‘my best friend has moved away, I don’t think I will ever see her again.’ It’s such a simple but subtextually mournful sentiment.” She adds, “Guilt and shame are often a big focus of queer love stories, but it was crucial for me that our film expressed the ecstatic moments of early love, I wanted to capture the joy and celebration of two people finding each other. Our assumption was that these two women could not regard their actions as sinful or shameful, if they had no precedent for it, given that they lived such isolated lives.”

Vanessa Kirby says, “I couldn’t believe how restrictive life was for those women who lived back then and are essentially our ancestors, they couldn’t make any decisions outside of the home, the home was their domain, their bodies and their time were owned by their husbands.”

Katherine Waterston says, “We don’t have many written documents from farmers’ wives, who often weren’t educated or even able to write. If they did keep diaries, those would have surely rotted and disintegrated by now, when their homes fell or burned down. We don’t have the same record of this lifestyle as we might of people who came from more privileged backgrounds. So I relied on the writings of those women, and certainly the Anne Lister diaries were very helpful,

because she was gay.”



Gentleman Jack- Suranne Jones, Sophie Rundle (c) Matt Squire

Gentleman Jack is about the life of [Anne Lister](#) (Suranne Jones), born in 1791, a landowner in Halifax, Yorkshire. Her historic home, Shibden Hall, is still standing and her extensive diaries have been published. A large portion of them, written in a secret code, describe intimate details of her numerous lesbian relationships.

Director Sally Wainwright says of Lister, “She identified with men and with a masculine persona, so she liked the idea of pursuing Ann Walker (Sophie Rundle) for her money, because that’s what landed men did then, they tried to improve their lot by marrying well. At the same time, she liked being a lesbian, because it allowed her to be in intimate situations with women in a way that a man in those days couldn’t.”

Suranne Jones says, “Anne Lister was a diarist, a lesbian, a traveler, an entrepreneur, a self-educator, an all-around brilliant woman. She was strong, funny, vulnerable, but above all she was courageous and full of energy, more than she knew what to do with. She lived in a world where the word lesbian didn’t exist, there certainly were no words like bisexual, gender non-specific, gender fluid, nothing like that. Even though she wasn’t out as a lesbian, she found a way to navigate relationships under the radar of society. This is an actual person that existed in our history, it’s amazing that we don’t know more about her. That’s the beauty of what we do and why her story is so relevant now, it’s because it was hidden away and now we get to celebrate her.”

Lister was successful in her pursuit of Walker, and the two women lived and traveled together from 1834 to 1840, when Lister died of a fever in Russia. They couldn’t legally marry in those times, but they celebrated their union by exchanging rings, vows and taking Communion together on Easter Sunday 1934 at Holiday Trinity Church in York.

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