

Marielle Heller Directs the Date Movie of 2024

BY REBECCA PAHLE

# LIFE'S A (NIGHT)BITCH



➔ It’s not often that a movie has a hook as compelling as “horror/comedy where Amy Adams thinks she’s turning into a dog. Oh, and it’s called *Nightbitch*.” The film adaptation of Rachel Yoder’s then-unpublished novel was announced in mid-2020, with Adams producing and starring. Curious cinephiles have been waiting ever since to see what, exactly, a movie called *Nightbitch* will be like. Now they’ll finally find out.

Initially slated for release on Hulu, *Nightbitch* was filmed at the end of 2022, with Marielle Heller (*A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*) directing and adapting for the screen. The yearlong delay of its

theatrical release (due to 2023’s Hollywood labor strikes) did nothing to impact the timeliness of the film: an artist (known in the script only as Mother) pauses her career to be a stay-at-home mom for her young son—something that proves way more difficult than she thought it would be, as evidenced by a growing conviction that she’s, well, turning into a dog.

Co-starring Scoot McNairy as Mother’s well-intended but sometimes oblivious husband, *Nightbitch* hits theaters on December 6, courtesy of Spotlight Pictures. In advance of its release, Heller spoke to BOXOFFICE PRO about her hilariously honest (if sometimes disgusting) meditation on motherhood.

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**What was it like screening *Nightbitch* for audiences for the first time?**

When you first get to screen a movie for a big audience, it changes everything. My favorite thing is making movies where, hopefully, people get to come together and watch the movie in the dark and have that collective experience. There are a number of hopefully surprising-slash-gross moments within this movie that are really fun to watch in a group.

**It’s an interesting movie to watch in the context of the last few years and the social changes brought about by the pandemic. Couples were working from home, and they weren’t really seeing people outside the family unit and that**

**caused a lot of people to think differently about the division of labor among couples and the expectation that the wife will “manage” everything.**

It’s exactly that. It’s about isolation and what it feels like to be alone in the world. It sort of took on a whole different meaning because of the pandemic. The book was written before the pandemic, but it felt so related to [cultural conversations about] the division of labor and what marriages are made up of, and how there’s this labor that largely goes unrecognized. Those invisible things were being made visible by the pandemic. And then it also brought to light what really happens when we’re stuck in our own minds, isolated, as well.

**It’s definitely the sort of movie that makes you think about your relationship. As you adapted the script and bounced ideas off of people in your life, did you find that men and women responded differently?**

My joke has been that the movie is a comedy for women and a horror movie for men. I’m friends with a lot of men and women who are in relationships. With my women friends, in particular those who are mothers, we tend to vent to each other a lot and talk about our lives and compare notes and help each other solve problems when it comes to parenting and relationships and things like that. For men who would read the script or watch a cut of the movie, the response was often quite different. The

women would think it was so funny, and the men would be like, “*Whoa*. I don’t like us talking about this stuff. This feels a little too close to home.” But, of course, most of the men that I’m friends with are good men who want to grow and change. So bringing up these tough subjects is good for their marriages—hopefully, ultimately—because it’s bringing the unspoken, unseen labor [of parenthood] to light in ways that I think are really important. But it’s painful, too.

Depending on what your personal context is, you’ll have a very different experience with the movie, and you’ll be bringing your own story into your watching of it, which I think is very evident when I show the movie. I’ll often screen the movie for a couple of friends at my house. Hearing when a couple may laugh or when they get awkwardly silent is telling [when] it comes to their marriage.

**In addition to the relationship element of the film, there are also elements that are almost body horror–esque. How was crafting that element of the movie, the quote–unquote “gross” bits? Because that’s not something that’s really been a part of your work before.**

There’s a little bit of it in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, with [main character Minnie, played by Bel Powley] checking out her body and touching her period blood. [With *Nightbitch*], my brother [said], “Wow, you finally made a movie that’s really *you*. It’s so gross.” I think he thinks of me as somebody who is obsessed with gross body stuff. We just grew up in a household where we weren’t shy about talking about disgusting things.

I feel like a big part of perimenopause for women is being more honest in talking about the gross, weird things that happen with our bodies. Similarly, when you get pregnant, there are not a lot of people who will tell you the real truth of what’s going to happen with your body.

My closest, dearest friends were the ones who would tell me things. I remember my best friend saying, “Hey, so you know that after you have a baby, you’re going to bleed for, like, eight weeks?” And I was like, “Wait, *what?*” “Oh yeah, all those periods you haven’t had, they’re all going to happen at once, and it’s going to be the heaviest period you’ve ever had in your life. You’re just going to bleed and bleed and bleed.” How had no one ever told me

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this? How had I gone 35 years on this Earth, thinking I know a lot about women’s reproductive systems, and I had no idea that I was going to bleed for like eight weeks after having a baby? [And my friends said], “Yeah, people don’t tell you about this kind of stuff.” There’s something about that honesty we can have with each other as women, and that we should have more of, that was part of the impetus for me with this movie, too. “It’s going to be kind of gross, but I’m going to go there. We’re going to talk about gross body stuff and try and destigmatize it a little bit.”

**To completely switch gears—did you go to the cinema a lot as a kid? What was your go-to movie theater?**

Yes, I did. We had both a drive-in and a regular movie theater in my little hometown of Alameda, [California]. At some point, both of them shut down. There was a period of time when our town had no movie theater, but now it has [the Alameda Theatre and Cineplex, which is] a beautiful, old, restored, historic movie theater. We very much grew up going to the mall to go to the movies. It was a big part of childhood and early dating.

**Are there any memories in particular that stand out?**

I remember being a teenager and deciding I wanted to sit away from my parents in the movie theater. That was a big rite of passage. It was like, “Okay, [my friends and I] will sit three rows behind you.” Or, “Okay, we can all go to the movies. You guys go see the movie you

want to see, and we’ll go to a different movie.” It felt like a first taste of freedom. And then [there were the] first dates, where my parents would drop me off and I’d meet a boy, and we’d go to the movies.

***Nightbitch* does seem like it would be an interesting date night movie. It must really work in a crowd.**

There’s a catharsis that you get when you’re seeing something collectively, and you’re all recognizing it as true. To laugh at something because it feels so relatable and true is so cathartic. I think that experience happens with this movie a lot.

**I can imagine a lot of those sorts of reactions happening with the interactions between Mother and her husband.**

I was careful not to paint him as a one-dimensional [bad husband]. He’s trying to do what he thinks is right. He’s just slightly oblivious and has no idea what it feels like to be [his wife] and hasn’t really spent a lot of time thinking about it until she lays it out for him. Even the best men that I know have a hard time putting themselves in their partner’s shoes. It’s just not something that boys and men are taught as much within our society. Women are conditioned by media and society to always empathize with other people, including men. Even just the fact that protagonists in movies are almost always men makes it so we can empathize with them in a way that they can’t really emphasize with us.

One of my favorite screenings was at Sundance Labs. I showed the movie to a bunch of Sundance fellows and advisers, and [I was told that] a bunch of the married men in the audience all met in the bathroom afterwards and looked at each other and were like, “We’ve got to go apologize to our wives!”

A lot of the good men that I know who see this movie may recognize something in themselves that they don’t want to recognize, or haven’t wanted to recognize, because they think of themselves as good partners and good fathers, and it sort of makes them go, “Oh, maybe I’m not quite as good as I want to be.” Or, “Maybe there are certain things I didn’t know.” There’s something so connective about seeing how hard this journey of being parents is and how hard it is to do together and recognizing that, yeah, this isn’t easy for either side. It’s not easy for any of us. ♥

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