

The crude propaganda of “The Wife.”

by Bruce Bawer



The other night, in the throes of insomnia, I scrolled through Netflix looking for something suitably soporific and ran across *The Wife*. Netflix describes the film, theatrically released in 2017 to middling box-office success, as follows: “In Stockholm, a supportive spouse looks back and reconsiders her choices in life as her self-absorbed husband accepts the Nobel Prize in Literature.” Accompanying this précis was a picture of Glenn Close – who received her seventh Oscar nomination for her performance in this masterpiece – with a pissed-off, tight-lipped look on her punim. Terrific! A dreary feminist character study. This would definitely rocket me off to dreamland.

Instead of nodding off, however, I got sucked in – not because the movie (directed by Björn L. Runge and written by Jane Anderson) was any good, but because from the beginning I had

an uneasy feeling about this opus and wanted to see how it played out.

The year is 1992. Joan (Close) and her novelist husband, Joe Castleman (a heavily bearded Jonathan Pryce), both seventyish, are having a quickie in bed. (Ewww.) In the morning they're woken up by a call from Stockholm informing them that Joe has won the Nobel Prize in Literature. (Warning: this whole article is going to be one long spoiler.) The caller proceeds to tell Joe that his work has "extraordinary intimacy and depth" and has "challenged the novelistic form in ways that will affect generations of writers to come." Do people from the Nobel Foundation really talk this way when they phone prizewinners at dawn? Maybe so. I wouldn't know. But I do know that throughout this movie, people are constantly talking about writing in ways that never ring true.

Anyway, Joe wins the prize. He hops up and down on the bed shouting "I won the Nobel!" It's supposed to be cute, but it's just weird. They throw a party to celebrate. Joe is ebullient; Joan hovers quietly in the background. A friend toasts Joe as "the greatest living author of the 20th century" (as opposed to what? The greatest living author of the 19th century?). Next thing you know they're jetting off to Sweden, where the egomaniacal Joe is swept up in the excitement and adulation while Joan starts getting that constipated look on her face. "Can we try to enjoy this?" Joe asks her.

Time for a flashback to 1958, when Young Joan (Annie Starke), a student at Smith College, is told by Young Joe (Harry Lloyd), her writing professor, that her new story is spectacular. In class, his lecture consists of a bunch of clichéd yap-yap about writing. ("A writer must write as he must breathe," etc.) At a reading by a lady writer (Elizabeth McGovern), Joan tells her: "I love to write. It's my life." But the writer, a neurotic mess whose books don't sell, advises Joan to scuttle her ambitions: "The public can't stomach bold writing from a woman." Then there

are them. "Don't ever think you can get their attention." Them? Who? Whose attention? "The men. The men who write the reviews, who run the publishing houses, who edit the magazines. Who decide who gets taken seriously." In short, writing is a man's game; women don't stand a chance in the sexist literary world. When I scrolled past the film on Netflix a couple of days after watching it, the tagline had changed to the following: "He's the big-name author. She's his better half. And in this world, only one of them can be recognized as an artist."

We're obviously supposed to take this assertion seriously. In fact, during the period covered in this and later flashbacks, the bestselling novelists in the U.S. included Grace Metalious, Ayn Rand, Simone de Beauvoir, Daphne du Maurier, Françoise Sagan, and Edna Ferber. Harper Lee won the Pulitzer; among the National Book Award finalists were Harriette Arnow, Shirley Ann Grau, Flannery O'Connor, May Sarton, Eudora Welty, Elizabeth Spencer, and Anya Seton. The Group, a novel by a Smith alumna, Mary McCarthy, spent two years on the bestseller lists. To claim that women were effectively barred from playing the literary game in the late 1950s and early 60s is to drop all these writers down the memory hole.

So Joan stopped writing because of that failed author's advice? Well, turns out it's not quite that simple. Back in Stockholm, halfway through the movie, we finally start getting a hint of the truth. Nathaniel Bone (Christian Slater), a writer who's been bugging Joe for permission to write his authorized biography, waylays Joan in the hotel lobby and, over drinks, tells her that he's poked through the archives at Smith and discovered some of her old stories in the college magazine. He asks: does she regret giving up writing? "No," she replies, "I had very low expectations about what I could achieve as a female writer." (Emphasis hers.) Then he goes in for the kill: he's hunted down Joe's early work in small literary journals, and it's lousy, without "a hint of his

mature voice.” By contrast, Joan’s college stories “read...like early Castleman.”

So there you have it: Joan, convinced that she had no chance of making it as a woman writer in those dark medieval days before second-wave feminism, secretly wrote all those novels and let Joe take the credit – and the accolades.

In more flashbacks, we’re shown how this charade got started. Young Joan, now living with Young Joe, gives a draft of his first novel a thumbs down: “Somehow it never comes alive.” But, she assures him, “I can fix it.” And for the next few decades she writes novels under his name, based on his rough notes, many of them apparently about his extramarital affairs. Cutting back to the present day, we see Joe and Joan attending the Nobel Prize dinner, where she gets up and bolts, finally unable to continue hiding her light under a bushel. At the hotel, she explodes, screaming that she’s spent her life “turning your appalling behavior into literary gold!” (Yes, she actually says “literary gold” – one of many cringeworthy lines of dialogue in this picture.) After they have the vehement back-and-forth that their life, and this movie, have been leading to, he tidily drops dead of a heart attack.

Plainly, this movie is meant to offer us a window on a complex relationship shaped by one man’s ego, one woman’s genius, their mutual love, and, above all, structural sexism. But none of it makes the slightest bit of psychological sense. At the story’s center, where we should find two credible, fully imagined characters, there is, instead, a cheesy gimmick designed to sell an implausible, and ideologically charged, premise. Then there’s the fact that the movie invites us to regard Jane as a long-suffering victim – even though nobody forced her to become a ghostwriter. The feminist riposte to this complaint would doubtless be that Joan’s fate is the result of a lack of self-worth that she picked up from the society around her in her girlhood. But how, then, to explain all those women writers who didn’t opt for a lifetime of

thankless subterfuge?

The whole thing is ridiculous. But hey, when the ideology is right, the critics will applaud. Checking out the reviewers online, I discovered that they loved *The Wife* and seconded its verdict on the culture of the book business. “Women,” pronounced April Wolfe in the Voice, “are still not seen as ‘serious’ writers or contenders for major prizes.” That review appeared in August 2018. The previous fall, the 2017 National Book Award for Fiction went to a woman named Jesmyn Ward. Four of the five finalists, and three of the five judges, were women. Three months after Wolfe’s review, the NBA went to a woman named Sigrid Nunez. Three of the five finalists, and four of the five judges, were women. The whole premise of *The Wife*, then, is hogwash: it’s as much a feminist fantasy as Netflix’s *The Queen’s Gambit*, in which a woman becomes world chess champion. (At this writing, the top-rated woman chess player is ranked #85 overall.) But how could the reviewers of *The Wife* do otherwise than parrot its preposterous premise? It came out at the very height of the #metoo movement.

Not until the film’s closing credits did I discover that *The Wife* is based on a novel of the same title by Meg Wolitzer, whose name I hadn’t heard in decades. In 1987, I wrote about her in an article about the “Literary Brat Pack,” a bunch of young fiction writers who were getting an inordinate amount of attention at the time but whom I considered total lightweights. After seeing *The Wife*, I discovered that in 2012 Wolitzer (now 61) contributed a long rant to the *New York Times* in which she complained that “women who write literary fiction frequently find themselves in an unjust world” where the so-called “leading novelists” are mostly men. As it happens, in that very year, 2012, seven of the top ten fiction bestsellers were by women. (Indeed, the bestselling novelist of the last 25 years is a woman, J.K. Rowling – although I suspect that Wolitzer would protest that Rowling, unlike herself, is not a “literary” writer.)

In any event, boo-hoo: Wolitzer, while never racking up big sales or a significant reputation, has managed to get more than a dozen of her books accepted by major houses, and I suspect that one of the reasons they've stuck with her – during a period when the publishing of midlist titles has been cut drastically, and when non-PC writers have increasingly found it difficult to get book contracts – is precisely that she's a woman, and, moreover, the kind of woman who complains that because she's a woman her books doesn't get enough attention. In fact, in the case of *The Wife*, anyhow, Wolitzer was very widely reviewed, and by critics who share her sexual politics. One member after another of the rabidly pro-feminist literary establishment applauded the novel for its criticism of – yes – the supposedly misogynistic literary establishment. In the *New York Times*, Claire Dederer praised it as “a near heartbreaking document of feminist realpolitik.” Other notices called her “courageous” for daring to chide the patriarchy – this, mind you, at a historical moment when certain writers were making their names and winning awards precisely for attacking the patriarchy.

Incidentally, Wolitzer is the daughter of a novelist (Hilma Wolitzer) and psychologist, went to both Smith and Brown, and lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Why is it always the most privileged women who feel the most oppressed by the patriarchy? Speaking of Smith, by the way, this film has found new relevancy in 2021, thanks to the recent scandal over Oumou Kanoute, a black student at that posh college who destroyed the lives of a campus janitor and cop by claiming – falsely – that they'd harassed her because of her color. In certain rarefied environments in America these days, the most privileged people are also the most oppressed – at least in their own minds – while the white working-class slobs get tagged as oppressors.

One last thing. Waking up the morning after I watched *The Wife* (yes, I finally got some sleep), I immediately

thought: *Big Eyes*. Yes, why hadn't I realized that before? The fictional story of *The Wife* was identical to the true-life story of *Big Eyes* (2014), about how Walter Keane (Christoph Waltz) became world-famous in the 1960s by putting his name on the kitschy paintings actually created by his wife, Margaret (Amy Adams). Now, that was a good movie. Written by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski and directed by Tim Burton, *Big Eyes* had what you could definitely describe as a feminist message – in fact, the real Walter Keane was much more of an overtly patriarchal type than the fictional Joe Castleman – but that message was subsidiary to the specifics of Walter's and Margaret's personalities, which were illuminatingly fleshed out in the film and which made Walter's long-term, and highly successful, exploitation of Margaret thoroughly plausible. There was genuine drama in their story – and a great deal of humor, too, plus abundant insight into human character and relationships. None of which, alas, can be said about the one-dimensional contrivance that is *The Wife*.

First published in