



Bening is superb, portraying both middle-aged loneliness and contentment

MOVIES

## Annette Bening is radiant in *20th Century Women*

STORIES ABOUT WOMEN AS TOLD BY MEN GET A BAD RAP these days—we hardly need our lives mansplained to us. But does that mean women shouldn't be allowed to peer into the minds of men either? Maybe we need to regain trust in a mode of thinking that has served the world of art for centuries: the sympathetic imagination.

In *20th Century Women*, writer-director Mike Mills tells a version of his coming-of-age in late-1970s Santa Barbara: Annette Bening's 50ish Dorothea is raising her son Jamie (Lucas Jade Zumann) in a ramshackle Victorian house. The two have always been close, and as Jamie hits adolescence, Dorothea wonders if they're not *too* close. She enlists two young family friends—Abbie (Greta Gerwig), a photographer who has just kicked cancer, and precocious sprite Julie (Elle Fanning)—to help raise Jamie, figuring they can teach him things about the world that she can't.

The picture is a companion piece to Mills' 2010 *Beginners*, also a semiautobiographical look at the ways adult children come to understand their parents as people. The Mills touches—vintage-photo and news-clip montages, matter-of-fact voice-overs—are all there. But *20th Century Women* has a more melancholy resonance. And Bening is superb, portraying the way middle-aged loneliness and contentment can be so intermingled that it's almost impossible to tell which is which. Dorothea doesn't "need" a man, but her aloneness isn't a perfect state either. With both her girlish laughter and her furrowed brow, which announces itself with the frown lines that haunt us all as we age, Bening captures this state of being perfectly. Mills deserves credit, too, for daring to wonder what this magnificent character was feeling in the first place.

—STEPHANIE ZACHAREK



FURTHER WATCHING

Director Mike Mills' *20th Century Women* and his previous film *Beginners* share themes of aging parents. Christopher Plummer won a 2011 Oscar for his *Beginners* role, an elderly dad who reveals to his son that he has terminal cancer and that he's gay.



TELEVISION

Lifetime's contemporary remake of the 1988 Bette Midler classic *Beaches* (Jan. 21) stars Idina Menzel and Nia Long as decades-long friends from starkly different backgrounds.



MUSIC

Front woman Katie Stelmanis sings chilling songs about injustice and division on Toronto synth-pop group Austra's third album, *Future Politics* (Jan. 20).

BOOKS

Journalist Stephen Kinzer brings American imperialism in the early 20th century to life using Theodore Roosevelt and Mark Twain as main characters in a lively nonfiction account, *The True Flag*.

MOVIES

A young married couple's relationship sours during a theater performance in *The Salesman* (Jan. 27). The Iranian-French thriller made a splash at the Cannes Film Festival.

