

## Review: 20th Century Women

[Giulia De Vita](#) finds 20th Century Women an impactful and moving experience

Sunday 5 March 2017



Image: A24

★★★★★

**Director:** Mike Mills

**Starring:** Annette Bening, Greta Gerwig, Elle Fanning

**Running Time:** 118 minutes

**Rating:** 15

Writer-director Mike Mills, most well known for his films *Beginners* (2010) and *Thumbsucker* (2005), presents in his newest oeuvre, *20th Century Women*, a reflection on time, memory and the inherent nostalgia that comes with the intersection of generations.

The story takes place in Santa Barbara, California, following the lives of single mother Dorothea (Annette Bening) who recruits two young girls Abbie (Greta Gerwig) and Julie (Elle Fanning) on a mission to help raise her disparate 14 year old son, Jamie (Lucas Jade Zumann).

At a time when the elective office in America is pursuing a regression to the 1950s with regard to female reproductive rights, the themes surrounding such rights that are present in this film could not be more paramount and relevant. Set in 1979, six years after the legalisation of birth control, the film excels in offering accessible, relatable stories despite the obvious generational gap with today's audiences. This is particularly seen through the characters of Abbie (Gerwig) and Julie (Fanning), who both seek support through Planned Parenthood, a service on which one in five women rely and that is now being threatened by America's new administration. This is a clear example of the kind of empowering quality this film has in being able to incite and engage audiences into a discussion that was as relevant in 1979 as it is today.

Annette Bening's performance is exquisite. Though her character is the oldest in the story, marking her generational difference through her love for Louis Armstrong, her various anecdotes about the 1950s and her comments defending her smoking habits, "When I started they weren't bad for you, they were stylish and sort of edgy, so it's different for me", her charming qualities, partnered with her sharp wittiness emblematic of her young son's attitudes to life, enhance the youthful qualities in her character. Greta Gerwig's performance is perhaps the most moving in the film. Playing Abbie, a Californian punk artist with an affinity for David Bowie and Black Flag, Gerwig does her best work since *Frances Ha* (2012). Having just recovered from cervical cancer and finding out she can't have children, Abbie feels discontent, yet through her friendship with Dorothea (Bening) and Jamie (Zumann), she finds her release.

Mills' strong aesthetic is one of the film's grandest qualities: combining a vibrant yet somewhat hazy style to capture the hallucinatory energy of 1970s California, whilst subtly manifesting elements of nostalgia that are pivotal to the film's narrative and tone. This element of nostalgia is largely seen through the generational gap in the relationship between Dorothea and her son Jamie, enhanced by the interruption of photographic stills throughout the film, visually reflecting the 1950s and 60s.

Another of the film's finest characteristics is its use and integration of music. As an avid Talking Heads fan, I was both thrilled and moved by the inclusion of their music, particularly in a charming scene involving Dorothea (Bening) and William (Billy Crudup) as they attempt to understand the difference between 'Black Flag' and 'Talking Heads' through an embarrassing yet endearing moment of interpretive dancing. The film's aesthetic balance is in perfect harmony with the soundtrack, exceptionally portraying the tumultuous, dynamic and progressive ambience of popular culture in 1970s America.

Overall, Mike Mills' *20th Century Women* offers viewers a powerful insight into the life of members of a disparate community who, despite their obvious dissatisfaction with aspects of their lives and the political atmosphere that surrounds them, are charming and relatable. Artfully shot and emotion-provoking, Mills offers a refreshing, impactful, and moving cinematic experience.



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