



T H E M A I D E N

A FILM BY GRAHAM FOY



2022 / Canada / 117 min / Color / 16mm / 1:85:1 / English



Synopsis

A perfect summer day ends in tragedy, weaving a cosmic connection between three suburban teenagers. Best friends Colton and Kyle float the river, trade dreams, and spray-paint in the local ravine. Like the boys, Whitney explores the ravine, seeking solace by writing and drawing in her diary. But when her best friend abandons her, Whitney disappears. The kids' lives swirl with natural wonder and beauty, but darkness and death loom not far behind. The discovery of Whitney's diary transports us to a mirror world. A magical ravine. A paranormal encounter. The return of a dead black cat. Is this a dream? The afterlife? Once deeply connected, are we ever really alone?



Director's Statement

I grew up in the community in Calgary, Alberta where *The Maiden* was filmed and spent much of my teenage years hanging out in the ravine, the film's central location. *The Maiden* is not completely autobiographical, however, there are many personal connections to events, characters and places contained in the film. For me, *The Maiden* is a poetic vision of teenage friendship, loss and grief broken into two parts which share a cosmic connection, revealing layers of meaning and purpose even amidst moments of deep despair.

In conversation with Graham Foy

The film creates a vivid sense of place can you tell us more about this part of Calgary and how its landscapes and spaces resonate for you and these teenage characters?

As a kid I was really drawn to the ravine that's featured in *The Maiden*. I spent a lot of time there with friends and alone. It's a huge space and a lot of it is quite wild with small meandering pathways that lead you in circles. I think as a young person it felt like one of the only places that offered a sense of freedom or escape from the monotonous sprawl of the suburbs and hostility of giant highways and construction sites that separate communities in Calgary. I really wanted to capture the ravine as a kind of sanctuary for the kids in the film and to depict this natural environment as the only space in their world where they can dream, play and feel free.

As an adult, writing the script for *The Maiden* and reflecting on my time in the ravine, the place itself took on a psychological dimension. There's a place in my mind that's just as real as the physical version of the ravine in Calgary. It's a place that my memories have distorted and kept alive in a way that has transformed the space to me, which I'm sure to most people is just a park they walk their dogs in, but to me it was and continues to be a magical world with many layers of hidden secrets to explore.

You follow your characters in a way that's both intimate and impressionistic. Can you tell us what inspired the ways you wanted to tell the story? How did you find a cast to inhabit this world?

When I began writing the script I was really excited and I tried to push myself to write a lot every day, but I quickly burnt out. I wasn't used to the endurance needed for a feature length project. Part way through the process I really fell in love with painting, so I would spend most of my mornings very focused on the film but I would give myself the afternoon to walk an hour to my studio and let my mind wander and just immerse itself in colors and forms and the physical action of applying paint to a surface. This is where a lot of the best ideas and connections in the film came from I think.

I was also very influenced by the simplicity of certain styles of painting, Milton Avery and Matisse especially. I was very interested in applying this type of simplicity to both the visual style of the film and the characters themselves. Much of Avery and Matisse's work depicts complex objects or landscapes or figures with a single slab of color. Often not aiming for realism of any kind, instead trying to distill an impression of life into very simple forms and colors. I tried to follow this philosophy in both writing and directing the film, instead of aiming for perfect realism, aiming to create an impression of friendship, loss, grief and hope through the characters, the spaces they inhabit, sound and duration that expresses these ideas in a simple but graphic way.

Though, within that I wanted to be very specific, especially to place and character, and a huge part of directing the film was the casting of the three lead actors.

It was crucial to me that we find three kids who could all feel comfortable bringing themselves to the roles--who could improvise easily within the story framework I set up. With each of the cast we knew almost instantly. We met Marcel who plays Colton first and I immediately fell in love with his good heartedness. We found Jackson, who plays Kyle, soon after on instagram through a mutual friend but we didn't reach out until a year later and when we did we discovered that Marcel and Jackson had known each other since they were kids. Jackson has this incredible confidence and charisma that was such a perfect paring to Marcel and their respective roles. We knew we would cast Haley, who plays Whitney, almost immediately as well, but had to wait due to the pandemic. She auditioned at a local high school and as soon as she sat down she told us we would never cast someone like her in the lead role because she has autism and that she would prefer to go out for the friend role. She then read us a personal monologue from her own journal, which left us completely floored. Haley has such a firm moral compass, and rich inner life, which shines so brightly when she feels safe; we could instantly tell she was special.

I worked very closely with each of the kids but mostly tried to create space for them on set for them to feel completely free. I think this is where the intimacy and specificity of each character comes from, the trust that we felt from one another on every layer of the project.

What drove you to tell a story infused by grief and loss, and why choose to explore these themes through the lives of teenagers rather than adults?

I'm not sure that I consciously chose to tell a story infused by grief and loss, I think it evolved naturally through my writing process, through the discovery of the characters and also perhaps through what was happening in my own life at various points in the writing process.

The choice to explore these themes through the lives of teenagers was very conscious though. I'm not a teenager anymore but it still feels close enough that the experiences and memories still feel real. Teenagers felt like a very natural subject for my first feature film as a writer / director, I could really relate to the feelings of discovery, newness, mystery and terror of doing something for the first time that I also remember deeply from adolescence. I also felt and continue to feel a deep respect for teenagers and I was very compelled to honor and learn from that point of view as an "adult". The highs of youth can be so high and the lows can be so low, I wanted to explore my own experiences with loss and grief at that age and now, through the lens of adolescence. I wanted to offer a vision of teenagedom that isn't condescending, that respects those extremes while also suggesting the possibility for light in the darkness.

Despite the darkness, the film also shows the characters finding human connection and understanding. In what ways do you think the film offers light and hope for us, young or old?

I feel that it's the characters remembering or finding friendship and connection that offers meaning and hope. But I also tried to show a deep link between the human characters and nature in the film, between the boys and the cat, Whitney and the plants and insects in the ravine. I wanted to show a connection, not just between the characters, but also between the many layers of life co-existing in the film, whether human, animal, insect or spirit.

The way the film explores masculinity is also complex and multilayered... how did you want to show its different sides?

I see myself deeply in all three of the main characters but perhaps it's most obvious in Colton and Kyle because this really was pretty much my adolescence. I remember very clearly the utter joy I got from doing really dumb stuff, breaking shit, fighting, while also still having this very polite kid inside who my mother raised to be respectful and kind and apologize when you do something wrong. I wanted to make sure this contradiction came out in Colton and Kyle right away where we show them being kind of lawless and rough, breaking things and then immediately after, show them being surprisingly sweet, when Colton picks the flowers to memorialize the dead cat and Kyle doesn't make fun of him, he's really supportive.

It's funny, also with Tucker's character (the cowboy), I really wrote him as such a cruel douche bag character and I had almost no intention in creating any redemption for him in early drafts, but when I met the actor Kaleb who plays Tucker in the film, of course he could play this really aggressive masculine character very well, but he is actually such a kind kid. As we shot his character very naturally transformed to have this depth as we discovered he wasn't just a jock he's also an amazing musician and has this lovely soft side as well. I found myself really drawn to the idea that Colton could find the possibility of a friend in someone he thought was an enemy.

How does Whitney contribute to lead the two boys to greater understanding? What is special about her character?

I really relate to Whitney's character as well and her experience with a different type of loss and the loneliness that follows. It's through witnessing Whitney's loneliness and loss that Colton is able to reflect on his own experience. I see Whitney's character as an artist or storyteller; she's the one character in the film who is able to express herself in her journal. She writes and illustrates a story about her own life. I think it's beautiful that she's not meaning to be an artist or intentionally share her story, her story isn't one about an artist trying to do something grand, it's about a person trying to express what they're going through.

I think Whitney's story in the film really shows the power of art and the power of artists and storytellers to be able to connect with others they might not ever meet. I've often found meaning and comfort in stories and art when processing grief and I feel that sometimes the characters in a book or film take on the presence of people I know. This is why as Colton reads Whitney's journal, the characters are for the most part people he's seen in his own life.

Can you tell us any more about the meaning of the title? It's a reference to the tagging, but is it also to Whitney?

The title of the film is really meant to be pictorial, the tag that Kyle spray paints says MAIDEN but it's not really about the word, it's like a hieroglyph, or a signature. The word doesn't mean anything specific, I always thought that maybe this was the name of Kyle's band. The word itself came from a very comedic story a friend of mine used to tell about a kid who started a band in high school that didn't know how to play any instruments, but it has no relevance to the film.

I think "The Maiden" really is Kyle, I see it almost as the legend of Kyle, a suburban myth. When I was writing the film I made several visits to the ravine, my parents still live nearby, and I was always struck by the graffiti on the train bridge. Declarations of love from when I was in high school, crude messages, make shift memorials for dead friends, there was a whole history on the bridge that would change each time I came back to visit as things would get painted over, or new tags would pop up. I really felt it was natural to have the title of the film be a part of the secret history of this place.

Can you tell us about the cat's role in the movie and the significance of cats for you Graham?

The cat is a kind of bridge between the two worlds I think. I love that its appearance at the end of the film could be interpreted as both a coincidence or something magical. To me this is the balance the film is trying to strike as a whole, life is a mysterious journey and depending on where we're at and how we look at the world around us, mundane things can appear miraculous, and just as easily be nothing special. Highlighting the possibility of mystery and magic in everyday life is what fills me with meaning and purpose as an artist.



Director

Graham Foy is a writer, director based in Toronto, Canada. His short film “August 22, This Year” was presented at Cannes’ Semaine de la Critique and the New York Film Festival. In 2021, his first feature film script, “The Maiden”, was invited to participate in the Moulin d’Andé residency as part of the Cannes’ Next Step development program. In 2022, his debut feature *The Maiden* won the TRT First Cut + award for works in progress at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival prior to its world premiere in Giornate degli Autori at the Venice Film Festival.

Selected Filmography

2022 *The Maiden*

2020 *August 22, This Year*, short

2015 *Lewis*, short



Cast

JACKSON SLUITER

Jackson studied sculpture at the Alberta University of the Arts and is the singer of the hardcore band Jailpocket. He is also a skateboarder sponsored by Vans and Nine Times Skate Shop. *The Maiden* is his acting debut.

MARCEL T JIMÉNEZ

Originally from Calgary, Alberta, Marcel recently moved to Toronto, Ontario to pursue his career in film. He is currently studying acting and filmmaking at the Toronto Film School. *The Maiden* is his acting debut.

HAYLEY NESS

Hayley is a recent graduate from the Performing Arts program at the Bow Valley High School in Cochrane, Alberta. In addition to acting on stage, Hayley enjoys writing short stories and plays. *The Maiden* is her acting debut.



Producers

F F FILMS INC.

F F Films Inc. is the independent film production company of director Graham Foy and producer Daiva Žalnieriunas, committed to the creation of cinematic projects that highlight the possibility of mystery and magic in the everyday. Founded in 2014, the company's short and feature length films have screened at many of the world's top international film festivals, including Cannes, Venice, TIFF and the New York Film Festival.

MDFF

MDFF stands for Medium Density Fibreboard Films. Founded by Dan Montgomery and Kazik Radwanski in 2009, MDFF is committed to exploring naturalistic, narrative and documentary forms in filmmaking with a focus on unique, director-driven projects that display a strong sense of cinematic handwriting. The company's films screened at some of the world's top film festivals, including the New York Film Festival, Berlinale, Locarno, SXSW, BFI London and Toronto International Film Festival. Their previous feature, *Anne at 13,000 ft* (2019), played in the Platform Competition at TIFF, the Berlinale Forum and went on to receive the \$100k Best Canadian Film Award from the Toronto Film Critics Association. For more information visit www.mdff.ca

Crew

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| Director | Graham FOY |
| Scriptwriter | Graham FOY |
| Producers | Daiva ŽALNIERIUNAS - F F FILMS INC. (Canada) Dan MONTGOMERY - MDFF (Canada) |
| Cinematographer | Kelly JEFFREY |
| Editor | Brendan MILLS |
| Production Designer | Erika LOBKO |
| Sound Recordist | Ian REYNOLDS |

Cast

JACKSON SLUITER - Kyle
MARCEL T JIMÉNEZ - Colton
HAYLEY NESS - Whitney
KALEB BLOUGH - Tucker
SIENA YEE - June
CHARLOTTE CLARKE - Charlotte
DUSTIN WHETTON - English Teacher/Football Coach
CLEM MARTINI - Guidance Counsellor
MACAULAY PETERSON - Terry
DIANA PRUS - Shop Teacher
CHERYL FOGGO - Teacher
OMARI FRASER - Football Coach Asst.
HEATHLEY PAINE CAMBALIZA - Heathley
ADRIENNE FOSSHEIM - Colton's Mom
KOLBY ZELL - Colton's Brother

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