



NEW RELEASES

Ammonite

Francis Lee's follow-up to his first film, *God's Own Country* (2017), is a story similarly entrenched in the wild beauty and weather-beaten roughness of British landscape, where the interpersonal hardness reflects a tough environment and economic scarcity. The first sound to hit the senses is of hard graft: the film reveals a woman on her knees, scrubbing tiles, over which a procession of gentlemen trample as they rush to admire the British Museum's latest acquisition – one of Mary Anning's 'sea lizards'.

Like Lee's debut, *Ammonite* is fiercely sensorial. Johnnie Burn's sound design wraps the protagonists' world in the unrelenting coastal winds and crashing white water that drags through the shore's shingle. The thick slippery clay of Lyme Regis's cliffs replaces the mud of the Yorkshire Dales, but the blood, urine and spit continue to flow. This time around, though, the shit is fossilised, as protagonist Mary Anning bluntly informs hopeful novice fossil-hunter Mr Murchison.

Kate Winslet serves up dour-faced, cold pragmatism in her role as the renowned palaeontologist and fossil-collector Mary Anning. *Ammonite* imagines a romance for a woman whose love life remains a mystery. When Mr Murchison heads abroad, leaving his fragile wife Charlotte to heal from an ambiguous trauma, Mary grudgingly agrees to let her trail along on her beach excursions: 'Looks to be fuck-all wrong with you to me,' she mutters to herself.

God's Own Country co-star Alec Secareanu returns as Dr Lieberman, a new medic in town, who develops feelings for Mary and, as in that earlier role, is met with suspicion. Lee taps into the barbed mistrust that characterises small-town life, surfacing in the wide-eyed horror of Mary's mother Molly as she detects the unmistakable lilt of an overseas accent.

Gemma Jones – another actor from *God's Own Country* – repeats her role as a reticent, grumpy mother figure who has led a hard life. Again, she watches her child with silent disapproval – initially, the wordless nature of Mary and Molly's relationship leaves it unclear who this cohabiting character is. The lack of warmth and intimacy is palpable. 'Mary!' she shrieks from another room in the house, demanding her daughter's undivided attention, and evoking the co-dependent bond of the two Edie Beales in the 1975 documentary *Grey Gardens*.

The Annings' reticence suggests the guardedness that comes with a hard life. Mary's family is working-class, her mother sickly, her father dead. The economic burden is on Mary's shoulders, and on top of that she's not welcomed into their boys' club by geologists who can afford to indulge as a hobby what for her is a livelihood. Mary builds up Charlotte's confidence, in a world where men automatically make decisions for her.

Saoirse Ronan's Charlotte is pallid and timid and, with her manners and finery, from a different world. Yet in turn they bring each other out of their shells, a risk perhaps communicated with strongest clarity in Stephane Fontaine's poetic cinematography: a magpie on the damp grey promenade, holding a snail shell in its beak. Like ammonites, the spiral symbolises life; this

shell is a bit broken but has been seen in a different light, a thing of value to another living creature.

Sophie Brown, *Sight & Sound*, April 2021

Palaeontologists have tended to be imagined by filmmakers as action heroes (Sam Neill in *Jurassic Park*) or stuffy scientists offered up for laughs (Cary Grant in *Bringing Up Baby*, Ross from *Friends*). Francis Lee's remarkable new film *Ammonite* excavates a very different fossil hunter: Mary Anning, a real-life 19th-century palaeontologist, played here, often covered in mud, by Kate Winslet. The second feature from the director of *God's Own Country* (2017) bears many similarities with his striking debut: it's an intimate character study about a solitary, withdrawn figure embarking on a tender romance, told with meticulous attention to realism.

Winslet has played many headstrong characters in the past but none as gruff, wary and introverted as she makes Anning. Saoirse Ronan's Charlotte Murchison, a sickly upper-class woman abandoned by her husband to Anning's care in Lyme Regis, tempts Anning out of her shell and is herself transformed in the process. The chemistry between the pair as their tentative relationship flourishes is a joy to watch. Winslet's Anning, Lee tells me on the phone from his remote home in rural Yorkshire, is much like the mollusc of the film's title: 'They both have a hard shell around themselves to protect their very vulnerable centre.'

After *God's Own Country*, which touched on raw Brexit-era issues in the UK, such as immigration, Lee had no intentions of delving into the UK's past. 'I never thought I would make a period film,' he admits. 'There's a set way in which period films are made, particularly British period films: the Austen and Forster adaptations, or the Merchant Ivory films. Although I enjoy them, they wouldn't be films I would ever make because they're about representing the past in a very glossy way. Often period films are not about the ordinary person's experience in that period, they're about the upper classes or the middle classes... That's not really my vibe.'

Lee had never heard of Anning but stumbled across her online when he was researching rocks to buy as a present for his ex-boyfriend. 'Instantly, she struck a chord with me. She was born into poverty and, despite having no education, no privilege in her life whatsoever, she rose to be the leading expert in her field throughout her lifetime – but was ignored by a totally patriarchal, class-ridden society. Mary primarily did it to earn money, to put food on the table, to survive. And I'm really drawn to survivors.

'I was also drawn to her because there was virtually nothing written about her by contemporaries beyond her discoveries; there's nothing about her personal life. I found two descriptions of her by contemporaries. One described her as lovely and warm and [that she] liked children. And the other one described her as a grumpy, difficult woman whose shop was dirty. And that was it.'

Anning was unconventional in other intriguing ways too. 'There is no evidence whatsoever that she ever had a relationship with a man,' Lee says. 'But there is evidence she had close friendships with women.'

He points to research about women and female same-sex relationships in the 18th and 19th centuries. 'There was so much evidence of letters written by women to other women about deep, passionate loving relationships that were totally underground. At the time, society believed women had no sexual

pleasure organs so the idea of two women being together was just not even thought about.'

Lee felt it important to cast an English actor in her forties, both to reflect Anning's age accurately at the time the events are set and to bring an understanding of the country's class dynamics. Winslet, he says, was on board as soon as she read the script, and committed to Lee's very physical and lengthy way of working, spending four months before the shoot building the character.

'Kate, as an actor, has no vanity,' Lee says. 'She went out and fossilled on those beaches in Lyme Regis for weeks and weeks and really learned how to do it all. She climbed those cliffs and got dirty, wet, tired and achy. She just threw herself into all of that.'

Ronan, Lee says, brings to Charlotte the ability to transform from 'a doll into a fully grown, empowered woman' – and was equally game, though her role required less physical grit and more needlework and piano practice.

Lee eschews improvisation, seeing extensive preparation rather as a way of enabling those involved to understand 'how did they become these people in this script?'

Winslet, he says, was adamant that Mary's motivations and conditions should be clear at all times. 'Yes, she can be unlikeable, but why is she unlikeable? We have to understand that's coming from a place of insecurity. Kate was brilliant at safeguarding that.'

He continues: 'The wonderful thing about her performance is her stillness and how she portrays all these internalised emotions. We worked very, very hard on those things, because they are very different from who Kate is, and the characters she's played before.'

Isabel Stevens, *Sight & Sound*, October 2020

Ammonite

Directed by: Francis Lee
©: The British Film Institute, The British Broadcasting Corporation, Fossil Films Limited
A See-Saw Films production
Developed in association with: BBC Films
Made with the support of the: BFI’s Film Fund
Presented by: BFI
A Sony Pictures Releasing International & Stage 6 film release
Presented by: BBC Films
In association with: Cross City Films
International Sales by: Cross City Films
Executive Producers: Simon Gillis, Mary Burke, Rose Garnett, Zygi Kamasa
Produced by: Ian Canning, Emile Sherman, Fodhla Cronin O’Reilly
Co-producers: Rob How, Nicky Earnshaw
Associate Producer: Katherine Bridle
Production Supervisor: Polly Jefferies
Production Co-ordinator: Hannah Jennings
Production Accountant: Jim Hajicosta
Supervising Location Manager: Casper Mill
Location Manager: Eddy Pearce
Post-production Supervisor: Deborah Harding
1st Assistant Director: Simon Hedges
2nd Assistant Director: Gemma Nunn
3rd Assistant Director: Lucy Andrews
Crowd Co-ordinator: Camilla Southwell
Script Supervisor: Tamsin Spivey
Casting Director: Fiona Weir
Written by: Francis Lee
Director of Photography: Stéphane Fontaine

Steadicam Operator: Richard Cornelius
Still and Specials Photographer: Agatha A. Nitecka
Visual Effects: One of Us, Dupe VFX
Special Effects Supervisor: Massimo Vico
Film Editor: Chris Wyatt
Production Designer: Sarah Finlay
Supervising Art Director: Richard Field
Art Directors: Bill Brown, Guy Bevitt
Standby Art Director: Paddy Paddison
Set Decorator: Sophie Hervieu
Graphic Designers: Jess Alexander, Georgina Millett
Production Buyer: Katie Adamson
Prop Master: Ewan Robertson
Costume Designer: Michael O’Connor
Costume Supervisor: Viveene Campbell
Hair and Make-up Designer: Ivana Primorac
Title and Credit Design: Sam Ashby
Composers: Dustin O’Halloran, Volker Bertelmann
Piano: Dustin O’Halloran
Music Performed by: Volker Bertelmann
Orchestra: Budapest Art Orchestra
Music Supervisor: John Boughtwood
Sound Design: Johnnie Burn
Production Sound Mixer: Phil Cape
Re-recording Mixer: Johnnie Burn
Stunt Co-ordinators: Crispin Layfield, Daniela Biernat
Geology Consultants: David Tucker, Paddy Howe
Geologist: Phil Stephenson
Dialect Coach: Laura Hart
Post-production and Digital Intermediate: Halo

CAST

Kate Winslet (Mary Anning)
Saoirse Ronan (Charlotte Murchison)
Gemma Jones (Molly Anning)
James McArdle (Roderick Murchison)
Alec Secareanu (Dr Lieberman)
Fiona Shaw (Elizabeth Philpot)
Sarah White (museum cleaning woman)
Liam Thomas (museum workman)
Sam Parks (curator)
Claire Rushbrook (Eleanor Butters)
Nick Pearse (Three Cups waiter)
Victoria Elliot (Three Cups maid)
Beatrice Curnew, Susie Baxter,
Gethin Alderman, Robert J Purdy,
Max Dowler, Paul Dodds (party guests)
John Mackay (fine gentleman)
Mladen Petrov (David the postman)
Wendy Nottingham (Charlotte’s maid)
David Juritz, Ben Hancox, James Boyd,
Peter Gregson (musicians)
UK 2020
120 mins

A Lionsgate UK release

NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

Ammonite From Mon 17 May
Sound of Metal From Mon 17 May
Nomadland From Mon 17 May
First Cow From Fri 28 May
After Love From Fri 4 Jun
 Fargo From Fri 11 Jun
The Reason I Jump From Fri 18 Jun
Nashville From Fri 25 Jun
Ultraviolence From Sat 26 Jun
Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero
and contributor Janet Alder

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