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Cannes film festival

**Review**

## Gentle Monster review - disquieting drama about two women facing the truth about the men they love

★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

## **Cannes film festival: Léa Seydoux is a wife and mother whose life unravels when police arrive to quiz her husband; Jella Haase is a detective dealing with her ailing father's misdeeds**

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**Peter Bradshaw**

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**M**arie Kreutzer is the Austrian director who created impressive and stylish pictures such as the [psychological thriller \*The Ground Beneath My Feet\*](#) and the [Habsburg biopic \*Corsage\*](#). Now she brings us this coldly eloquent and disquieting Franco-German drama about two women who find themselves imprisoned by a duty of care and loyalty to the men in their lives. One discovers something terrible about her husband and immediately goes into a state of negotiated denial, the other loves her demanding job as a police officer, and is all the more dependent on the live-in cleaner/care worker who looks after her difficult elderly father.

Léa Seydoux plays the first, Lucy Weiss, a French musician who has built up an enthusiastic, though niche following for her experimental pop-classical hybrid performances. Her mother, played in cameo by [Catherine Deneuve](#), was a more conventionally successful concert pianist. Lucy has a comfortable home in Munich with her German TV director husband, Philip (Laurence Rupp), and their lively nine-year-old son, Johnny (Malo Blanchet). But Philip has had a breakdown, collapsing sobbing in Lucy's arms, apparently due to overwork and drug problems. She agrees to move to the countryside to soothe his emotional pain, and for a while things look better. Philip is evidently devoted to Johnny, playfully filming him and Lucy for some little personal project, and manfully building his son a trampoline in the garden.

But then Elsa, played by Jella Haase, a detective with the Munich police, shows up at their front door, accompanied by an intimidating array of about half a dozen uniformed officers with a search warrant, demanding to take away all Philip's computers, tablets and smartphones. Stunned, Lucy asks Elsa - and Philip - what this is all about, and Philip, though clearly in no doubt, is unable to answer.

Haase's performance gives Elsa a fierce, calm, professional cop's gaze: uncompromising but not confrontational with her hair tied back; this is very different from Lucy's tousled, often sleepy sensuality, which from this moment disintegrates into a kind of horror, like a sleepwalker shaken awake. As for Philip's expression, Kreutzer cleverly invites us to compare it to another case that Elsa and her criminal division are investigating. They show up at a suspect's door and the man of the house opens it, sees the police, realises in the next moment what this is about, but his instant denial and aversion keeps his expression politely blank as he asks if he can help.

As for Philip, he spins Lucy a number of fatuous lies: that he was looking at this material on chat groups and online picture-sharing forums as research for a new documentary - or, even more implausibly, that he was just brokering these images for "the money", to afford this new country home. And Lucy's own ordeal is her

need to believe him, to twist and contort what she sees so it will fit into Philip's shapeshifting explanations. As for Elsa, she is unbending in her pursuit of the wrongdoer at work, but at home desperately makes excuses for her father, Hermann (Sylvester Groth), when he inappropriately harasses his care worker, Natalia (Patrycja Ziółkowska).

The central point is whether all this involves Johnny; Philip swears it does not but Elsa says that, despite the police child psychiatrist and doctor finding no evidence of abuse, one can never be sure, and it is this not knowing which is the drama's agony. This is a bleak, pessimistic film with two excellent lead performances.

Gentle Monster screened at the [Cannes film festival](#).

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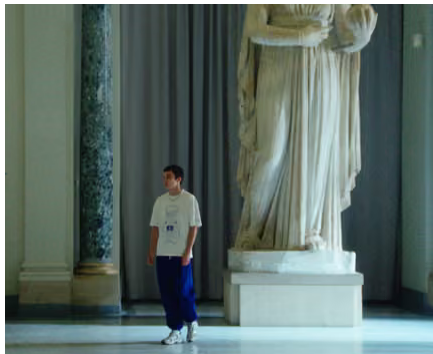


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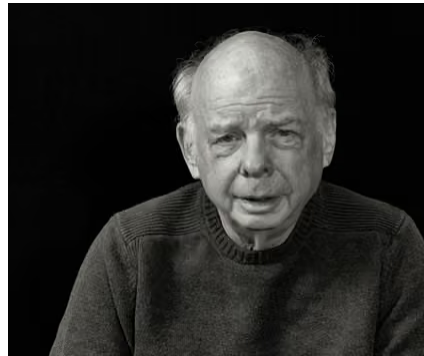
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