



# GREAT ADAPTATION

By Matthew Hays

**Sarah Polley talks about *Alias Grace*, the golden age of TV, and the long hours when in production**

When asked about her first encounter with *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood's period novel that was first published in 1996, Sarah Polley says her most powerful memory is of furniture.

"I think I was 17 at the time, and I remember the couch I was sitting on so well, because I don't think I moved from that couch until the book was finished. And that was a few days, because I'm a slow reader."

Polley, the Toronto-based Oscar-nominated screenwriter, actor, and director, has long-entertained visions of adapting the celebrated novel, which tells the story of a 19th-century maid who may or may not have murdered her employer, airing this fall on the CBC and Netflix in November. "The book really got under my skin," Polley recalls. "I do wonder why it affected me so deeply. I got lost in that world and loved learning about that period in Canadian history. I loved the questions it forced me to ask."

Polley says the resonance also had to do with her own activism at the time. "I was pretty much spending most of my time as a political activist. I was learning so much about this point in history, and that we'd actually had a rebellion in this country. Instinctually, I was seeing every frame of it. It was naturally something I wanted to adapt."

Getting \$30 million for a miniseries of this scope and ambition is pretty epic in itself, and Polley concedes it's been a long path and there were different visions of what it was to be along the way. "When I first started to see it as a feature, it was really daunting. I realized I was probably going to have to lose many of the parts I loved the most. There was something so depressing about that — the context, the political stuff, was all going to have to go away if it were feature-length. When I finally decided to make it into a miniseries, we had entered into the golden age of TV, but the miniseries still hadn't come back."

## “Screenwriting had already been my main passion”

Thus *Alias Grace*, and the people behind it, benefitted from what can perhaps best be described as *formal* timing — the series is presented as its form is welcomed by both broadcasters and audiences. “My agent said just four or five years ago that there were limited places to pitch a miniseries. But TV has now made room for a show like this.”

When Polley spoke to *Canadian Screenwriter* about the process of adapting Alice Munro’s short story into the film *Away from Her*, in 2007, she described the process as “fantastic and liberating.” She laughs when I bring up the quote. “This was much more challenging. I would not use the words ‘fantastic’ and ‘liberating.’ It’s a hard novel to keep track of as a reader or screenwriter. Throughout production I had to remind myself of what version belonged to whom, what time frame we were in. It’s a story that takes place in several time frames, with many different versions of the same stories. The closest thing I can compare it to is *Stories We Tell* [Polley’s feature-length 2012 documentary, about her own complicated family life], where it was just really hard to keep track of the threads. You’re dealing with multiple versions of the same story, the ephemeral nature of the truth. That’s really hard to write about in a way that’s linear and clear.”

But Polley says the biggest game changer in terms of her writing process is having two small children. “I’m always frustrated when I read writers talking about their process. None of people’s processes allow for children. Joan Didion talks about getting up, going for a walk, doing some more writing, then you have dinner, then another walk, then more writing. None of this makes any sense to anyone who has children, and I think it probably makes people who have children feel like they can’t write. The truth is, there’s no waiting for inspiration when you have children. There’s the hour you seize upon when someone is sleeping. There’s what you can get done if you’re lucky enough to get that hour. You become efficient and productive and realize that all the things you used to do to procrastinate were not a necessary part of the process.”

Procrastination is a luxury, Polley says, and not one parents with wee children can afford. “I’ll have ideas while I’m doing other things, but really, you don’t have that kind of time. You have to accept yourself far more as a kind of craftsman than as an artist. I think it’s a healthy shift: to think of yourself as more of a carpenter than some kind of precarious fairy who needs every condition to be right to spin their magic tales. That’s not going to happen.”

Thus Polley’s writing routine for *Alias Grace* revolved around her kids’ sleep routines. “I wrote most of this screenplay during their naps. And I couldn’t have done any of that without a partner who had a flexible schedule. Something that really inspired me was reading about Carol Shields. When she was writing her first novel she had four kids. When the youngest went to preschool in the mornings, she would then take the others to school. She would come up, spend about an hour tidying up socks or whatever had to be done, and then she had just one hour to write. And that hour was non-negotiable. It was the only time she had. And in nine months she had a novel. That was the only time I read about a writer’s process that was helpful in any way.”

Polley is blunt about the balancing of priorities, and reflects on her own past as a child actor. “I missed my own childhood, I wasn’t interested in missing out on my own kids’ childhood. I love making movies and writing, but I really wanted to have kids. I was lucky because my career was established before I had kids. So I have been incredibly privileged. I think it’s really hard to be starting out and be this involved in parenting. This works for me and I’m lucky to be doing it.”

As Polley wrote, she says she thought about period films that didn’t necessarily have traditional narrative structures. “I thought about pieces that didn’t have formal structures, at least not in the way we normally think of them. I thought a lot about Terrence Malick’s films, in particular *Days of Heaven*. I also thought about Mary’s movies [Mary Harron, who directed *Alias Grace*], like *American Psycho* and *I Shot Andy Warhol*, films that had a certain edge and brutality to them but



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INTRO SPREAD PHOTO: CHRISTINA GAPIC

PHOTO: JAN THUIS/CBC



Sarah Gadon plays Grace Marks in the Sarah Polley adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* on CBC and Netflix

also an intelligence. But generally, I don't think too much about other films when I'm writing."

Polley is also aware that we are in the midst of what appears to be a Margaret Atwood Moment, with the TV miniseries adaptation of the dystopic sci-fi thriller *The Handmaid's Tale* sweeping the Emmys, and now *Alias Grace*. The screenwriters of *The Handmaid's Tale* have taken some liberties with their adaptation, building on current Trump-era anxieties to ramp up the resonance factor. But Polley says her screenplay has remained quite faithful to the source material. "I would say the adaptation is quite true to the book. Obviously, there were changes that had to be made in terms of structure, but we didn't stray too far. The best part of the process is that I would have these marathon meetings with Margaret, both before I started working on it and after I had various drafts. We would sit for four or five hours and I got to ask every question I ever wanted to about the book. It was an amazing experience. I got to ask what the important elements were to her, things that might not have been obvious to me, and make sure those were included."

Since Polley has been fantasizing about this adaptation for decades, many felt she would be the natural fit as director. But again, her parenting left her feeling another director would work just as well. "I've been writing for the past few years, but also writing scripts for other directors. That has allowed me to be present in my kids' lives in way that I wouldn't otherwise be able to. Screenwriting had already been my main passion, the writing is always what I wanted to do, so it's a dream come true to live a life as a writer. But there's also the fact that it's much more conducive to a life with kids."

Polley says the demands of making film and TV are often ludicrous, and she'd like to think it's not too hopeful to imagine that changing. "Shooting is still 17 hours a day or so, and that means I'm going to have to miss my kids waking up and going to bed. That's really hard for me to wrap my head around. That's something about directing that's going to be really hard for me to come back to. I will make another film. I'd like to think that I will be able to make a film in a way that everybody, including the men on the set, will have

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time to see their families. To do things other than just working. But also, when I was writing it, I wasn't seeing every shot. I wasn't seeing how certain scenes would be realized. Usually I do. When I thought of Mary directing, I got very excited."

Film and TV schedules, as they stand, are not conducive to normal functioning, Polley insists. "It's not productive, it's not safe and it's not humane. People are dying after driving home after 16 hours on a set because they fall asleep at the wheel. People fought for the eight-hour workday a long time ago. In the film industry, we're fighting for a 12-hour workday. It makes absolutely no sense. There are children and elderly people who need taking care of. You can't have people working these hours and expect them to do all of these other things."

In optimistic news, Polley is thrilled that Heritage Minister Mélanie Joly decided (after much lobbying) to send the CRTC decision about Canadian private broadcasters' spending on Canadian content back to the CRTC for review. "This is the ugly, ugly truth. The only thing that will compel Canadians

to hire other Canadians is regulation. I've been in situation after situation with people who believe in the Canadian film industry, believe in Canadian talent, and they're looking for one more exception to bring someone in from somewhere else. If there's any room for an exception, it will be taken. The only power I have in a room like that, with producers or broadcasters, is to say, we can't, we have to hire a Canadian. That's the only power I have. Even if the Canadian is more talented, more experienced, more exciting — we have an innate self-deprecation or even self-loathing that compels us to think that someone from somewhere else will be better. It's something subconscious and something you can't argue with.

"You're going to get written off as someone fighting an ideological battle and waving the flag, even when you're fighting for the best person for the job who happens to be Canadian. The only tool that I have in that fight are the regulations.

"We're just colonized that way. We need regulation to protect us from ourselves." ■