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## Maria Chapdelaine

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## Maria Chapdelaine

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Maria Chapdelaine* (2021), directed by Sébastien Pilote.

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### Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



**Maria Chapdelaine (2021), dir. Sébastien Pilote**

**Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLjKQ2MjOOs>**

There is probably no one more appropriate to adapt the great Québécois classic novel *Maria Chapdelaine* than Sébastien Pilote. The three feature films he has made prior to this beautiful adaptation of French writer Lous Hémon's 1913 story were all written and shot in Pilote's home Lac St. Jean region in which the novel is set. Pilote's gift for making landscape a character in his stories has included the snow-submerged suburbia of *Le Vendeur (The Salesman, 2011)* to the summery industrial parks of Saguenay in *La Disparition des Lucioles (The Fireflies are Gone, 2018)*. In *Maria Chapdelaine*, we are introduced to the Péribonka region northeast of Québec City in a long horse-drawn sleigh sequence, as Maria is brought home in the pre-war 1910s from the village where she has been visiting, to the remote homestead where her father has relocated his family, away from civilization. The undulating snowdrifts and thawing winter waterfalls evoke the

work of Québécois painter Clarence Gagnon.<sup>1</sup> Gambling on the thawing river, they manage to cross on ice that heaves and sighs behind them, making clear it is the last time anyone will before the next winter.

This opening has its echoes in another famous Canadian novel about a young woman, *Anne of Green Gables*,<sup>2</sup> but Louis Hémon's internationally bestselling novel, published five years after Lucy Maud Montgomery's classic, offers no back story for its heroine and no sense of imminent conflict. Maria (and the generations of her family before her) have only ever worked the land. Maria is an average young woman coming of "marriageable age" pursued by three very different though equally advantageous and alluring suitors. She is the oldest girl of six children: the two oldest boys work away as loggers, bringing important income to the family.

Working on the land, clearing away the trees and removing the stumps is the stuff of everyday life in the three seasons that permit it in this harshly unremitting territory, and *Pilote's* story dwells in that central and all-important activity. Like Anne Shirley, Maria Chapdelaine has dreams of being a teacher, but unlike Anne she is easily reconciled to being needed on the farm instead. Maria is not a prophetic feminist icon: her simple goodness is her greatest appeal to those who love her.

*Maria Chapdelaine* is about relationships, which dominate and provide the only sense of narrative in the film apart from the question of whom Maria will marry. There are no encounters with wildlife (no sign of wildlife even), no fires, and only one very brief blinding snowstorm. There is no drought or plague of insects or any of the other tropes we have come to expect in frontier stories. Instead, the film embodies a lived nostalgia, while managing never to become sentimental. The dirt-lined faces and bodies of the homesteaders are depicted with almost elegiac beauty in a litany of axe blows and trees bending in psalm-like call and response. Yet, as in all of

Pilote's films, the emotional currents run very deep: they rise up and splash us like a sudden wave. When Maria's most preferred suitor is unexpectedly lost, her grief emerges from a well spring of repressed feelings, captured exquisitely in a single scene when she wanders barefoot in the middle of the night out the door and into the snow. Pilote keeps his camera in a long shot on the door frame as she moves away from us in her nightgown into the perishing cold, only to be chased, caught and carried back by her father. The camera never moves, because the movement of the characters conveys everything.

The Québec of the story's era, and thus the film, are deeply immersed in Catholicism. When Maria's grief over her secret fiancé's death seems to everyone more than the circumstances would merit, her father brings her to meet with the local priest who gently but firmly admonishes her for emotion that would only make sense if they had been engaged. Unable to reveal the truth, Maria listens without response, while appearing to also take in his words. In this world, clergy garner more genuine influence and respect than doctors, as we discover in a later sequence when a doctor (played in a brilliant cameo by Pilote favourite Gabriel Arcand) not only proves ineffectual in a pivotal moment, but then co-opts the family horse as he leaves.

And yet, Québec Catholicism forms a gilt frame around the story. The film's five titled chapters begin with "Ist Missa Est," "The Mass is Over." Maria is attending a mass when she looks over her shoulder and sees one of her suitors sitting at the back. We then cut to her riding in a sleigh with her father. Thus love, family, and religion are established in one or two brush strokes and before the credit sequence has ended. And yet, this is not a pious portrait: faith is understood to be the backbone of life but not an obsession. The unpredictability of unforeseen events is "the hands of God" at work, and they are also very much the fruit of human endeavour. One aspect of the spirituality of the film is that the two are always interwoven.

Pilote's casting holds in its cultural grip the long view and memory of previous adaptations,<sup>3</sup> particularly Gilles Carle's 1983 version which starred Carole Laure, then much older than Maria's age of sixteen. This time, Pilote has cast nineteen-year-old Sara Montpetit, whose youthful features help convey that precious moment in a young woman's life of this era when her future hangs on a single decision. Montpetit plays sublimely with suggestion. She has an almost early Garbo-like neutrality, so that when there is a smile or a smirk it draws quiet attention. Montpetit's gifts are especially evident in the gently distinct ways that she engages each of her suitors (played by Émile Schneider, Robert Naylor, and Antoine Olivier Pilon), who offer up their characters in rich offerings. From the wildness of Francois, the trapper, to the city businessman Lorenzo, to the neighboring homesteader Eutrope, each man makes an equally appealing petition to her, and each truly loves her. Part of the film's effectiveness lies in their equality, though the movie gently helps us reckon that only one can ultimately be chosen.

For most of its two hours and forty minutes, the film is generally light in tone; yet the simple story pivots on two unexpected deaths. The merciless climatic elements and the hard work ultimately take their toll on the capacity of average human beings. The story subtly implies that one of these deaths was caused by impatient longing, the one emotion that cannot survive in a world where everything has its season and things must grow in the time they take. Sébastien Ricard and Hélène Florent as Maria's parents illuminate the commitment and determination that is required to pick up and start again several times over, and to do so out of a sheer love for the land. Maria's mother says that watching one's own land being cleared is the greatest joy one can experience. In the hands of Sébastien Pilote, it is our joy too, especially when burnished by a setting sun, casting light across soaring trees.

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<sup>1</sup> Québécois painter Clarence Gagnon often painted rural Québec scenes. He also illustrated an early edition of the novel. See Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine*, with illustrations by Clarence Gagnon. Paris: Editions Mornay, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> See L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*. Prince Edward Island: L. C. Page & Co., 1908.

<sup>3</sup> *Maria Chapdelaine* has been adapted to film four times: twice by French filmmakers and then twice by Québécois filmmakers. See *Maria Chapdelaine* (Julien Duvivier, 1934), *Maria Chapdelaine* (Marc Allégret, 1950), *Maria Chapdelaine* (Gilles Carle, 1983) and now *Maria Chapdelaine* (Sébastien Pilote, 2021).