



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

WOMEN TALKING (15)

Director: Sarah Polley

Starring: Rooney Mara, Claire Foy, Jessie Buckley, Ben Whishaw, Frances McDormand
US, 2022, 1 hour 44 minutes

Adapted from the 2018 novel by Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* begins with the on screen text 'What follows is an act of female imagination' that serves as a distancing device. Then we're drawn into a scenario in which the dialogue is urgent and compressed both in time and in space. What draws us in to the situation are the performances of actors who, with the exception of Ben Whishaw, are female, familiar and intensely articulate: Rooney Mara, Claire Foy, Jessie Buckley, Frances McDormand.

The film is based on a real-life incident that took place in a Mennonite community in Bolivia. At night, the women were repeatedly drugged and raped and made to believe that the assaults were dreams, punishment for having sinned. Neither the book nor the film portray this violence, but concentrate on the aftermath. Waiting for the men to return to the community after bailing out the perpetrators, the action is condensed as eight women take on for the entire female body the dilemma of what to do next.

'In Toews's novel, a lone man named August attends the meeting. He's there to transcribe the session—the women are illiterate, having never been allowed an education—but he also serves as a guide for the reader, interpreting the arguments and providing background information. His thoughts aren't interruptions but essential analyses of each woman's take.

'As she worked on the adaptation's script, Polley assumed August's task. She rewrote the screenplay more than a dozen times, poring over it from every character's perspective at least twice to "titrate each moment so that nobody got lost." In one pass, for example, she wrote as if the lead character were Ona (played by Mara), the group's levelheaded peacemaker; in another, she took on the perspective of Mariche (Buckley), the most cynical member. "Even if they're behaving in ways that are really difficult and obstructionist, I could at least feel it from the inside out of how they were arriving there," Polley said. "I think it was really important to keep everybody in balance, and that no voice was more important than the other."

'The Herculean exercise paid off: *Women Talking* feels energizing to watch, because it's interested in parsing every opinion rather than exhausted by the characters' thoroughness. Polley, who's picky about projects—this is the first film she's directed in a decade—told me that the chance to immerse herself in each character's mindset helped draw her to the story. Toews's novel, she explained, examined a reckoning in an unusual way: It moved beyond the immediate, outrage-fueled aftermath and evaluated every argument's merits and flaws. That's the opposite of how today's discourse tends to pan out, especially on social media, where indecision seems intolerable. "To be a fence-sitter is treacherous territory," Polley said of being online.

'In the hayloft, however, that's not the case. The women's meeting can be seen as a microcosm of how loud declarations must transform into quieter reflections for the thorniest real-life discussions—such as the ongoing debate over sexual harassment in the workplace—to progress.' Shirley Li, **The Atlantic**

Notes compiled by Jo Comino