

Relishing making a mess

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As a complicated mother on screen, Carey Mulligan is already vexing viewers

BY KYLE BUCHANAN

As an actress, Carey Mulligan is drawn to women who are unapologetic, but as a person, she still can't help but be a bit self-conscious.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," the 33-year-old Mulligan said as she sat down across from me at a coffeehouse here. Told that she was tardy by only two minutes — an awfully minor infraction when it comes to celebrity interviews — Mulligan still felt compelled to apologize. Why? "I can't help it, I'm English," she said.

We had met up to discuss "Wildlife," the new film in which Mulligan plays Jeanette, a 1960s housewife who must fend for herself and her son after her husband (Jake Gyllenhaal) leaves them in the lurch to go fight a forest fire. Jeanette embarks on a risky affair that will either stabilize her family or destroy it, and that sort of challenging character choice is what drew Mulligan to "Wildlife," which the director Paul Dano and his co-writer, Zoe Kazan, adapted from the novel by Richard Ford. "Jeanette doesn't need to be likable," Mulligan said. "She just needs to be who she is."

For Mulligan, who had her breakout moment with the Oscar-nominated "An Education" (2009), Jeanette is the latest in a series of complicated leading women that has led her to "Mudbound" last year and the play "Girls & Boys," which she performed Off Broadway this summer. Mulligan was excited to discuss her recent career path, though ever self-deprecating, she ended our interview by exclaiming, "I feel like I just talked a load of bollocks!" Here are edited excerpts from our conversation.

Has it fascinated you to see how other people judge Jeanette?

It really has! I've been doing a lot of Q&As with real audiences, and they're the punchiest Q&As I've ever done. They're asking me to defend her a lot, in a roundabout way. We had one guy in New York who went after me and the character — never had he seen such an "appalling woman." No women have disliked her in the Q&As, but we've had a couple of men who do.

Why do you think that is?

Because they don't like seeing a woman who's out of line, you know? They've been raised to see women in a very particular way and have very particular expectations of women, and allowing a woman onscreen to screw everything up for a minute just seems so out of what they're used to.

Even the fact that the movie stays behind with your character is something they may not be used to. Many films would instead follow Jake Gyllenhaal's character as he goes off to battle a wildfire, and you'd be reduced to a pleading voice on the phone.

There's kind of an injustice to it. "Why does he get to go off and fight a wildfire? I want to go off and fight a wildfire." I think quite a lot of women and mothers can identify with that.

[Read our review of "Wildlife."]

Have you been offered a lot of "wife



Carey Mulligan, above, as a wife left to fend for herself and her son in "Wildlife." Below, Mulligan in a scene with Jake Gyllenhaal, who plays her husband.



SCOTT GARFIELD/IFC FILMS

on the phone" parts?

I've been offered the wife to a great man millions of times — the wife of the brilliant politician, the girlfriend of the tech genius. Not many parts like Jeanette exist, and I couldn't believe that Paul and Zoe trusted me with it. It

was like proof that Paul thought I could act.

How has your relationship to acting changed as you've gotten older?

When I first started and had no idea what I was doing, I would draw a lot

from my own life. If I had to be emotional, I would think of something awful happening to a family member. But when I did this play, "Girls & Boys," about a woman who loses her two kids, I said from the outset, "I really don't want to think about my kids when I do this. I want to keep it totally separate, because it's the only way I could do this show."

And did that work?

The further the play went on, the less I could make that separation. But I really miss "Girls & Boys" now. I remember midway through the last performance being like, "I will never do this again," and now, four months later, I'm like, "I wonder if they kept the set!" When I finished the play, I said to my husband, "I feel weirdly sad about saying goodbye to the invisible children in this play." Which is the most pretentious thing I'll ever say.

What do you miss about playing that character?

She was bold and funny. She didn't care what people thought of her, and I do, massively. Way too much, more than I should.

Do you feel like you have a good idea of what Hollywood thinks of you?

They think I'm "serious," probably.

Do you ever get offered comedies?

Barely. And the ones I've been offered are incredibly broad, not-great ones. I would totally do comedy if the right thing came along, but it's so scary. What if you tell a joke and nobody laughs?

By and large, you work in independent movies. "The Great Gatsby" was a big-budget studio film, but that's a rarity on your résumé.

After "An Education," my agent told me, "You shouldn't take a job unless you can't bear the idea of someone else doing it," and that's how I've chosen everything since. If I'm reading a script, I think, "How would I feel if Insert-Name-of-Other-Actress was doing this, and I saw the poster up outside the theater?" And if that makes me feel gutted, then I want the part.

So you don't have anything against Marvel movies, in theory?

If I found a part in a Marvel movie

where I was like, "It's going to kill me if someone else takes this," then I would do it. But I could never make myself do something that I'd be miserable in, where I'm just doing it to increase my box-office draw or make money. Now I have two children, so if I'm missing bath time with them, it has to be a good reason.

Have you ever gone back and watched an older film of yours?

I've caught bits. Most of the time I'll switch it off, but if they play "Pride & Prejudice" on some movie channel, I'll flick over and watch some of it.

Could you watch "An Education" now?

It was so long ago that it feels like a different person, so maybe. There were no expectations about anything I did back then, which in retrospect is so lovely. It feels a little bit different now: I would worry about playing a part and getting terrible reviews. Maybe that's very self-involved to say, but there's an expectation now to be good that I genuinely didn't feel then. I could do whatever I wanted to, and no one was watching me.

A misperceived thinker recast

BOOK REVIEW

I Am Dynamite!: A Life of Nietzsche
By Sue Prideaux. Illustrated. 452 pp.
Tim Duggan Books. \$30.

BY PARUL SEHGAL

All his life, Friedrich Nietzsche hated being photographed. Execution "by the one-eyed Cyclops," he called it. In almost every surviving photograph, he looks fugitive and uneasy, "as if his clothes are borrowed," Sue Prideaux writes in an exemplary new biography, "I Am Dynamite!" "The elbows and knees are not in the right places and the jackets strain at the buttons."

A man stuffed into the wrong clothes. This is how Nietzsche has come to us through history, for decades notoriously misappropriated by Nazis and nationalists. Under the watch of his sister, Elisabeth, handmaiden to Hitler, this philosopher who deplored German nationalism ("Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, that is the end of German philosophy") and anti-Semitism ("I will have all anti-Semites shot") was refashioned into an intellectual architect of the Third Reich. The Nazis distributed copies of "Thus Spake Zarathustra" to troops in the field.

Fifty years of scholarship have done much to rehabilitate Nietzsche's reputation and to reveal the extent of Elisabeth's meddling. She assumed care of him in his final years, when fame had

found him but he was long gone to madness. With the tacit approval of Heidegger, she strung together uncollected notes into poisonous little tracts, piecing together a Nietzsche to serve as a Nazi mouthpiece. His ideas of the Übermensch and will to power were stripped of their provocation and clowning and rendered as crudely authoritarian. The "hard maxims" he proposed to the individual — to be courageous, to seek out the enemy and relish war — were made bluntly literal and adopted by nations, bizarrely, given that the only thing Nietzsche loathed more than war between nations (to him a form of madness) was the idea of the nation itself. He gave up his Prussian citizenship early in his career and remained proudly stateless.

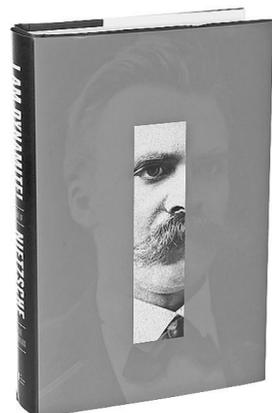
In this biography, Nietzsche steps out of the mists of obfuscation and rumor, vividly evoked with his beautiful manners and ridiculous mustache, the blue-lensed glasses to protect his delicate eyes. Prideaux relies on the mapmaker's method of triangulation, using time not place as the fixed point and drawing her subject into focus by examining the events in his life, his personal writing and his published work. "This falls into the biographical fallacy, I know," she has said in interviews, "but my justification is a passage from 'Beyond Good and Evil' where Nietzsche says that every great philosophy is a form of involuntary and unperceived memoir. In other words, all philosophy is, to an extent, autobiography. One illuminates the other." What is illuminated here owes as



DOUGLAS FRY

Sue Prideaux and her book on Nietzsche.

much to Prideaux's sensibility as to her approach. Nietzsche said, "To see something as a whole one must have two eyes, one of love and one of hate." But to see Nietzsche, it seems helpful to have binocular vision that can accommodate the sublime and the ridiculous. His was a life of prodigious work and self-sacrifice but also profound blundering. Taking a vacation, he could be counted on to lose his spectacles, his luggage and his way. No sooner was he adopted by a mentor (Wagner) than he was dispatched to shop for his custom-made silk underwear — and betrayed later when Wagner sug-



ALESSANDRA MONTALTO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

gested, in a letter dictated to one of Nietzsche's committed enemies, that Nietzsche's legendarily bad health was caused by compulsive masturbation.

Freud said that of all men, only Nietzsche truly knew himself, and his letters can be wildly funny and full of comic set pieces. Prideaux relishes this side of him. It helps that she is something of a specialist in the lives of histrionic male geniuses of the 19th century. Her previous, prizewinning biographies were of August Strindberg and Edvard Munch (incidentally both of them passionate Nietzscheans; Munch painted "The Scream" after

being introduced to Nietzsche's work by Strindberg).

For all his influence, Nietzsche lived a short and solitary life. There are only so many notes for a biographer to hit: his intense friendships with Wagner and Lou Salome, the intellectual it-girl of her time, muse to Rilke and Freud. What Prideaux contributes is mainly shading and psychological insight — never more than when she takes on his prime antagonist: his body.

Nietzsche's father died early, from "softening of the brain," after suffering years of debilitating headaches and periodic muteness. Some kind of neurological disease or disorder most likely afflicted the son as well. (Prideaux casts doubt that he suffered from syphilis as is commonly believed.) From childhood, Nietzsche was subject to excruciating headaches and eye pain. A school doctor predicted total blindness. Cures were humiliating and painful: He was left to lie in darkness for a week at a time, leeches attached to his ears to draw the blood down from his head. Later, on the battlefield of a Prussian war with France, he contracted diphtheria and dysentery. The treatment at the time — silver nitrate, opium and tannic acid enemas — destroyed his intestines. At any moment in his adult life, he suffered from uncontrollable vomiting, hemorrhoids, blinding eye pain and the constant taste of blood in his mouth.

He spent much of his (sane) life wandering between spas in the Alps, desperately seeking cures, toting along 220 pounds of books with him. But

Prideaux brilliantly describes how he "turned his affliction into an advantage." His famous style — those stinging aphorisms — became his way to condense his thoughts during moments of reprieve between attacks of incapacitating headaches and eye pain. "It is my ambition to say in 10 sentences what everyone else says in a whole book — what everyone else does not say in a whole book," he wrote in "Twilight of the Idols."

It can feel as if Nietzsche's actual philosophy gets short shrift in the book. In the acknowledgments, Prideaux thanks the philosopher Nigel Warburton for overseeing these sections — efficient if bloodless summations. They don't convey the allure of his ideas of the Dionysian, his fury at the human tendency toward submission and self-enslavement, his particular appeal to the shipwrecked. Style is Prideaux's concern. But, of course, it was style that left Nietzsche so vulnerable to distortion. (It still is: The white nationalist Richard Spencer, for one, has said he was "red-pilled" — awakened — by Nietzsche.) He did not advance a school or system of thought, but a spirit of inquiry. He called himself the "philosopher of perhaps." He once ended a book with "Or?"

Nietzsche was fond of Ovid's idea that *Bene vixit qui bene latuit* — he lived well who hid well. Taking his example, we might rejoin: "Perhaps." As this attentive, scrupulous portrait makes clear, there may be even greater pleasures — to say nothing of justice — in being found.