

Ammonite

It might seem like slim pickings to make a movie drama out of the limited—but productive—life of a woman obsessed since youth with collecting fossils off a harsh English coast, but if you want one, we now have it with “Ammonite,” the saga of the 18th C. self-taught fossil hunter, Mary Anning (d. 1847). Starring Kate Winslet as Mary, the film was written and directed by Yorkshireman Francis Lee. But rather than just recounting the scientific drudgery of “a woman who sells seashells by the sea shore,” Lee relates the more compelling story of a furtive lesbian encounter on the rock-bound swells of Dorset.

Mary lives a repetitive, barren life in a grim stone house in the sea-side town of Lyme Regis with her widowed mother Molly (Gemma Jones), where they make a meager living selling sea trinkets to tourists. With lights low and clothing thick, their lives are shrouded in hues of dusty grays and dank blues, and poor mother, mildly addled, focuses slavishly on polishing eight ceramic figures, the number of children she has lost.

Into their lives comes a fossil enthusiast, Roderick Murchison (James McAvoy) and his proper but ailing wife Charlotte (Saoirse Ronan). Once they’ve settled in, the husband asks for a favor from Mary: he must go on a scientific trip, but could the Annings (especially Mary) keep Charlotte entertained with life by the sea so she can get out of her stupor? This means going shelling with Mary to pass the time.

Their relationship is rocky to start: Mary has no time for coddling this woeful woman and Charlotte is put off by Mary’s rough curtness. With time (the film does this quite gradually) Mary notices a spark in Charlotte, while the latter leaves her primness behind, gets muddy on the beach, and admires Mary’s sense of purpose. An accident leaves Charlotte abed, and Mary, perforce, becomes her caregiver, pushing the relationship along and leading to the inevitable first kiss, then on to carnal knowledge that heats up sodden Lyme Regis. A misunderstanding intrudes when Charlotte, completely smitten, invites Mary to her London home after her husband has returned, a proposition she rejects.

Please note: while there was a real Mary and a real Charlotte—they were close friends—director Lee has totally concocted the love affair. This is one of those movies, usually tagged as “Based on a true story,” which veers wildly into amatory fiction to enliven a turgid environment with sensuous punch. Also to note: while the development of the affair is mostly in furtive, modest steps, there is one erotic scene that more than earns the film’s “R” rating—an explosion of carnality in a film of otherwise great restraint.

“Ammonite” (a coiled, chambered fossil shell from the Cretaceous period) is a studied two-hander for Ronan and Winslet, and they acquit themselves well. The young Irishwoman’s transition is convincing; a young city lady warming to a woman of sturdy competence and strength. She comes to shine just as her early

pallor transforms into roseate cheeks. You can see why Mary becomes smitten. Meanwhile, Winslet also brightens, if more slowly, as she encounters sentiments she has never felt before. This is the kind of role in which Winslet—head down, hair in a tight bun, eyes forlorn--excels: a wary, suppressed woman discovering new human terrain. She is like one of her fossils, which, when cracked open, reveals a hidden, primordial beauty.

“Ammonite” may sound grim, like a naturalistic novel by Thomas Hardy, who chronicled this same Dorset coast (called Wessex in his novels) but with a glimmer of hope.

(The film is rated “R” and runs 117 minutes).

(November 2020)