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# All Hail Laura Dern & The Feminist Matriarchy Of Your Favourite Films

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There's no doubt about it: [we need more women in movies](#). On screen, behind the camera, in the writing rooms, you name it – especially as [only 9% of 2017 and 2018's top-grossing films had gender-balanced casts](#).

The problem is not only that women have trouble getting their foot in the door, or the circumstances they find when they get there ([harshly highlighted by the #MeToo movement](#)), but the attitudes of Hollywood's most prominent directors, too. Earlier this year, Martin Scorsese stated that he "doesn't have time" to write female characters, after being criticised for the lack of diversity in his films. In his most recent release, *The Irishman*, [Anna Paquin speaks fewer than 20 words](#). This makes the stories played by the women who do make it onto our screens even more important. Enter: [Laura Dern](#).

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In 2019, Dern brought us three very different characters with her work on [HBO's \*Big Little Lies\*](#), Netflix hit [Marriage Story](#) and Greta Gerwig's take on [Little Women](#). Something ties the three roles together, besides Dern herself: the matriarchal feminist power that she expresses. In a period of female underrepresentation in movies and TV, her performances over the past year have been both necessary and delicious.

After winning a Golden Globe and an [Emmy for her performance in \*Big Little Lies\*' first season](#), Dern's return as corporate hotshot and mother Renata in season two consolidated her place in

ADVERTISEMENT the hall of fame with her portrayal of true female rage and power.

Renata is a woman unravelling as her husband is charged for insider trading (also putting her personal fortune at stake) while her daughter suffers with anxiety. Instead of submitting to the injustices of her marriage and buckling under the pressures of parenthood, Dern channels a defiant, unapologetic fury into her character.

Renata's life veers increasingly out of control and her angry, incredibly quotable outbursts – "I will NOT not be rich" is a fan favourite – come in public and private blows. When her juvenile, cheating husband tells her to "calm the fuck down", she smashes up his toy train collection and commands: "Maybe you should've shown a woman a little respect!" When [Meryl Streep's morally ambiguous Mary Louise](#) questions her parenting abilities in the middle of a coffee shop, she delivers a blistering defence of her decision to have a career and not be a stay-at-home mum. "Keep your eyes on your own fucking paper, Mary Louise," she returns.

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These scenes created a tidal wave of viral feminist internet memes; we couldn't get enough of her messy rage.

Why? Because in 2019 we desperately needed to see women action their real, gut-wrenching anger in the face of adversity, and Renata (and in turn, Dern) was championed for it, ultimately becoming one of the best things about *Big Little Lies*. In an interview with *Vogue*, Dern discussed her unexpected ["deep empathy"](#) for Renata, which undoubtedly stemmed from our identification with her stunning, untamed presentation of female indignation and strength. Bravo.

Dern played a more collected role as divorce lawyer Nora in [Noah Baumbach's \*Marriage Story\*](#) - a role that earned her a [Golden Globe](#), an [Oscars nomination](#) and a [nom at the SAG Awards](#), too. She's a sharply dressed corporate shark who doesn't hesitate to dive into the divorce battle between Nicole (Scarlett Johansson) and her soon-to-be ex-husband Charlie (Adam Driver). But most affecting about Nora is the monologue she delivers to Nicole about the double standards of motherhood and fatherhood.

She talks about behaviour that is regarded as "unacceptable" in mothers – drinking too much wine or telling your child they're an asshole – and stresses that it would not be viewed the same way were a father to act similarly. She argues that a well rounded, modern dad is a recent idea, with women previously accepting "silent, absent, unreliable and selfish" traits from the men with whom they raise children. "We accept them. We love them for their fallibilities."

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Nora smoothly declares that women do not get the same acceptance for their fallibilities, "structurally or spiritually". It is a damningly accurate evaluation of a cruel inequality when it comes to societal expectations of mothers and fathers. "You [as a mother] will always be held to a different, higher standard. And it's f\*\*ked up, but that's the way it is," she explains.

Dern said the feeling of delivering this monologue was ["like Christmas morning"](#) and quite

ADVERTISEMENT frankly it's a huge gift to any woman feeling inadequate as a mother, girlfriend, partner or wife. Though Dern isn't the female lead in *Marriage Story*, she steals the show with a crushing, frank analysis of what it is to be a woman and a mother in modern society.

In *Little Women*'s 2019 remake, Dern steps away from the role of hotshot CEO and corporate lawyer – positions that denote the more obvious signs of power. Here she plays the March family's matriarch Marmee, and her character evokes no less strength, vitality or matriarchal wisdom than Renata and Nora.

Gerwig and Dern worked together to bring characteristics of author Louisa May Alcott's own mother Abigail to the character, using old letters that she and Louisa wrote to each other. In one letter Abigail encouraged her daughter to embrace her wilder impulses, regardless of what society might say. "There are some natures too noble to curb, too lofty to bend. Of such is my Lu," she wrote.

This sentiment culminated in a scene between Dern's Marmee and Saoirse Ronan's Jo, with the latter confiding in her mother about her inability to control her anger and passions. Marmee states that she's been "angry nearly every day of my life" but has learned to suppress it with patience. When Jo resolves to mirror her efforts, Marmee insists that Jo must do better, urging her to embrace her true, flawed, unpredictable nature – directly quoting Abigail's letter.

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Marmee's frankness about both her own anger and how important it is that her daughters don't squash their passions is part of an important decision by Gerwig and Dern to discuss and celebrate a different side of motherhood, womanhood and Marmee herself.



Dern has stressed that her characters in *Little Women* and *Marriage Story* are as "wildly different as two characters can be" but has also insisted that they both work to achieve the same objective, diving deep into the life of unapologetic, authentic, strong women. "It's a continued conversation about what it is to be human, what it is to be female, what it is to be a woman in power, what it is to be influencing others," she told [Deadline](#).

The same can be said for all three of Dern's key roles this year. While Renata, Nora and Marmee were all typically considered supporting roles, the messages they carried meant they shone through as memorable and important in their own right.

They treated us to a very crucial display of matriarchal power on screen, with each performance painting the delightfully angry, frank and unapologetic feminism that should colour 2020 and

*Little Women is in cinemas now*



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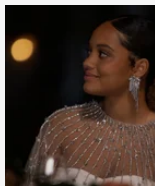
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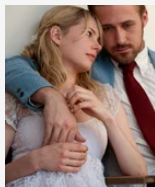
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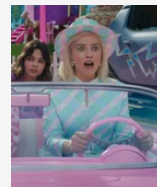
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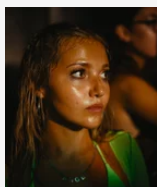
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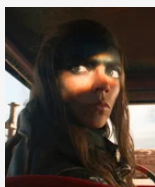
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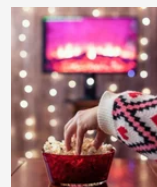
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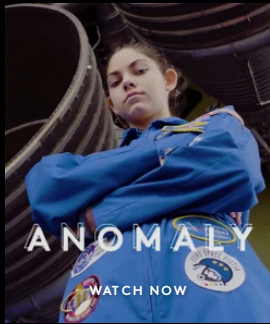
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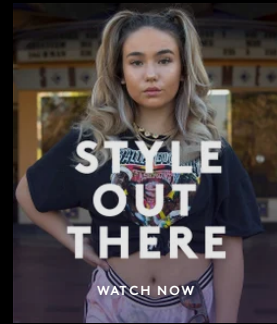
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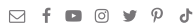
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