

Martha Marcy May Marlene

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [December 27, 2011](#) issue

This first feature by writer-director Sean Durkin, a big hit at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, centers on an enigmatic character with a minimal backstory. Martha (Elizabeth Olsen) is a 22-year-old who has spent the past two years living in a cult community in upstate New York.

As the tale begins, she has decided to escape. She disappears into the woods and eventually calls her sister—who hasn't heard from her in three years—to come pick her up. Martha is secretive with her sister about where she has been, but through a complex series of flashbacks and intercuts we learn what has happened and how it has affected her.

Part study of cult mentality, part examination of the consequences of a splintered family, *Martha Marcy May Marlene* is at its best in showing both how the attractive and easily swayed Martha is won over by the structure, discipline, camaraderie and faux gentleness of the cult community and how the charismatic cult leader, Patrick (John Hawkes), takes advantage of Martha's innocence. Also of interest is the way that the film turns from psychological drama to thriller as we begin to share Martha's inability to separate dream from reality and memory from fantasy—suggesting that the cult's evil is much closer than anyone thought.