

“We spend our lives  
trying to understand how  
we change over the  
course of our lives.”

Ellar Coltrane

**About  
a boy**



## CULTURE

## Unique and ambitious, the latest film project from Richard Linklater follows the life of a child and his family over a 12-year period. *Joyce Morgan* meets the makers and star of *Boyhood*.

say. But he acknowledges one has influenced the other. He discussed his decision to get an earring with Linklater, with whom he spoke regularly over the 12 years. Coltrane took up photography while working on the film, mentored by the set photographer, and that interest was incorporated in the story. When he needed to drive a car for the final scene, the film's art director taught him.

Coltrane's parents, both artists, were present during the filming and, for the most part, he found working on the film enjoyable. Unlike Linklater's daughter, Coltrane never requested his character be killed off.

"It was something I looked forward to most years," he says. "There were definitely times when I was less enthusiastic than I wish I'd been ... As I got older, it was such a common part of my life that I never really questioned it. I don't have many memories before working on this. It's just been part of my life."

In observing a boy growing up, Linklater weaves a subtle spell. He does not go for the obvious rites of passage – so we don't see Mason's first day at school, first kiss or first toke. Linklater's choices were governed by his awareness of the capricious nature of memory.

"In my own memory, I would wonder why am I still thinking of this and not that? Why do I remember that one weekend or this or that?" asks Linklater. "I wanted to filter how some things stick in your memory and how others just take a back seat. And it's pretty unpredictable. You might be having a fun time with your kid and years later they don't remember that, but they remember this other little thing. It's the way any memory works. It's the mystery of what leaves a long-term impression and what doesn't."

Linklater has called the film "human time-lapse photography". Time passing is at the heart of the movie, as it has been in some of his earlier works: notably his *Before* trilogy, also starring Ethan Hawke, alongside Julie Delpy, which revisited characters several years on.

Linklater, who won the Silver Bear for Best Director at this year's Berlin International Film Festival, chose to capture the 12 years from early childhood because they are a period of dramatic change.

"It begs the question, are you the same person 12 years later that you were at the beginning?" says Linklater.

Although he had the arc of the story in mind from the outset, the year between filming each section allowed time to finesse the details and get the tone right.

"There was a structured story, all that was worked out. But then I had that year to think about what was next, what the film needed. I could bring up ideas that were later and bring them up sooner and take advantage of that gestation every year to essentially make 12 movies," he says.

"I had the last shot of the movie in mind probably 10 years before we shot it. But I had the exact dialogue for that scene worked out maybe 10 hours before we shot it. I couldn't predict the right emotional pitch for that until we had actually lived those years, had those experiences and then got to that point."

We first encounter Mason as his single mother is about to move house and his father has re-entered his life. Over the years, his mother negotiates a series of bad romantic relationships, his fun but feckless father takes on responsibility, and Mason emerges from the shadow of his extroverted Britney Spears-loving older sister. While there is no lack of drama, the power lies in the film's focus on small, seemingly commonplace moments that constitute the bulk of human experience. It feels more chamber piece than full-blown epic.

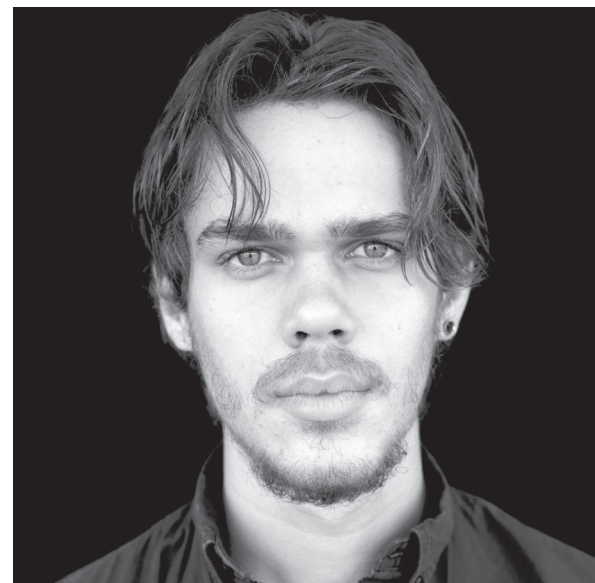
The passing of time is also marked with subtlety. There are no sudden dissolves or "one year on" titles. Shifts in music and technology indicate time's passage, as Coldplay gives way to Arcade Fire, and chunky mobiles to iPhones. The physical changes in the two screen siblings are at times more startling in sister, Samantha, than in Mason's more gentle evolution, particularly in the first half of the nearly three-hour-long film. In time, Samantha and the parents take a back seat.

Although largely seen through Mason's eyes, the film is in essence about a family. So why call it *Boyhood*? Producer Cathleen Sutherland acknowledges that while *Boyhood* was always on the call sheet, there was much debate over the title.

"It is a story about all of those relationships – it's about motherhood, parenting, being a father, people's failures, how we all interrelate. It is more than just boyhood," she says. "We actually thought about naming it *12 Years*, but then *12 Years a Slave* came out."

Presenting the parents as divorced from the outset was not done for ease of scheduling but because few lives today are untouched by marital breakdown, including most of the film's key cast and crew. Linklater, Sutherland and Hawke's parents are all divorced and Hawke also underwent a divorce during the film's making.

One of the film's strengths is that it shows, without varnishing over the difficulties, separated parents forging strong, ongoing relationships with their children. While



it is the extremes of family dynamics – dysfunction and neglect at one end and helicopter parenting at the other – that are the staple of so many films, it is rare to see one that makes so compelling a case for what British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott called the "good-enough" parent.

For any child, bullying and peer pressure are among the most treacherous waters to negotiate. Bullying is encountered briefly in the film, but arguably the most difficult scene to watch involves peer pressure as Mason encounters a group of older boys at a teenage house party. Amid braggadocio and drinking, talk turns to girls. The sexism and objectivism is toe-curling. Sutherland admits the scene made her uncomfortable.

"I have my own daughter and I'm like, wait, 'Is this what boys talk about? Is this how they talk about girls?'" she says.

Coltrane has no doubt they do. So the scene rang true for him?

"Yes. Teenage boys are awful," says Coltrane.

"They're mean to each other. We are kind of taught to look out for ourselves by putting each other down. So it just results in this contest of trying to dominate each other. It's something I hope is changing."

"Actually it's not really a rite of passage. It just scars you emotionally. It leaves you with this need to dominate people and it's not healthy. That's a large part of the state that our world is in – there's a lot of very insecure men who feel they need to dominate everything."

It is his final scene with Ethan Hawke that has the greatest resonance for Coltrane. In it, Hawke impresses on the young adult the need for personal responsibility.

"It came at an opportune time in my life. That's what a lot of people forget, that I was also growing up. Even though it's not real, he's telling me I'm responsible for my own happiness," says Coltrane.

He keeps in touch with Hawke, a former child actor, as well as the Linklater family. And he refers to Sutherland, who accompanied him to Australia, as his "road mom".

In making a film over such a long period, the odds of something unravelling are significant. Life can intervene, actors can depart – or worse.

"That was a very uncomfortable thought," says Sutherland. "It is something that you recognise. You catalogue it and put it away. You say a little prayer. It was one of those things that was always in the back of my mind, the 'what ifs'."

And life did intervene just as filming was about to wrap. Last October, days before the final scene was to be shot in a national park in Texas, the US government shut it down, prompted by the conservative Tea Party's opposition to healthcare reform.

"Everything was planned, we knew where we wanted to go, we knew what trail we had to hike down. We had all these pieces together. And all of a sudden that all got blown up by Ted Cruz and the Tea Party," says Sutherland. "Everybody got kicked out of the park and they closed the gates and put guards on the roads and that was it. We couldn't go and film there."

They headed instead to Big Bend Ranch, a state park and hence unaffected by the shutdown. Despite the behind-the-scenes drama, the final scene is mesmerising, not least for the grandeur of the scenery. Coltrane, who is poised to go to college to study art, had mixed feelings about finishing the film.

"It was a relief but also kinda heartbreaking to be done with it because it had become so much more than a job or a film. It was a part of our lives that we all cared for very deeply and really valued our time together every year. It was very hard to say goodbye to it in the end," he says.

But is it goodbye? Linklater doesn't rule out a sequel to *Boyhood*, although he has no current plans: "I'll follow my own impulses. If it seemed something that had to be done..." ●

Soon after he dresses up as Harry Potter to attend a party, the young star of Richard Linklater's film *Boyhood* has a question. "There's no real magic in the world, is there?" he asks his father. No. "And no elves?" No.

It is a fleeting but pivotal exchange, the instance when childhood begins to crumble. The boy stands at the threshold of a complex but less enchanted world. *Boyhood* follows the boy and his fictional family over 12 years during which its focus, Mason (played by Ellar Coltrane), grows from a dreamy six-year-old with a Game Boy in hand to a rangy youth with his hands on a steering wheel.

Unique is an overused word, but there is little to compare with the way in which the director made his film. Instead of substituting Coltrane for an older actor to mark the passing of time, Linklater stuck with Coltrane and the same key cast members throughout.

For three or four days every year for 12 years, the director filmed Coltrane and his fictional family – including his screen mother (Patricia Arquette), father (Ethan Hawke) and older sister Samantha (Lorelei Linklater, the director's daughter) – as they negotiated life's eddies and flows. The result is a film that raises questions about identity, about the blurry lines between fiction and reality and what, if anything, remains constant in an ever-changing world.

Comparisons have been made between *Boyhood* and Michael Apted's *Up* series, which has revisited a group of British children every seven years since 1964. Yet Apted's work is a documentary series not a drama. *Boyhood* is certainly a far cry from *The Truman Show*, in which its unwitting star is the unsuspecting centre of a lifelong reality show.

In observing a boy transform over the years, Linklater's film is in one sense closer to the Harry Potter films where watching its young star, Daniel Radcliffe, grow into adolescence was part of the appeal.

Yet unlike Radcliffe, Coltrane has been shielded from the spotlight until now. He saw the film for the first time only earlier this year. Coltrane was alone – at the director's suggestion – when he first observed the view from the other side of the lens. He sat in front of his television in his Texas home and watched himself slowly metamorphose. He says he is still wrestling with the disconcerting experience.

"We spend our lives trying to understand how we change over the course of our lives," says Coltrane. "It's not exactly watching yourself grow up, but it's seeing at least a part of myself ageing ... The impact it has on me and the way I feel about it is changing every day. It is a very tender process."

Coltrane, who has just turned 20, sits cross-legged in ripped jeans and a black T-shirt on a film company's sofa in Sydney, a paper bag with a half-eaten muffin at his feet. The earring he acquires late in the film has gone; there's now a nose-ring. There is a quiet stillness about him that is also apparent on-screen and not simply due to the lotus-like posture he has assumed on the couch. Where Mason ends and Coltrane begins is impossible to



**JOYCE MORGAN** is a Sydney-based arts and culture writer.