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T. S. Kord's "Little Horrors": A Book Review

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As much as I am ashamed to admit it, after being knee-deep in horror for over two decades, I never considered "evil children" to be a subgenre in the same way that the slasher, found footage or exorcism is. T. S. Kord's "Little Horrors" (out now from McFariand) changed my mind and opened my eyes. She identifies no fewer than 300 films with "evil children" to appear on screen since 1900, making it one of the oldest subgenres of all. Over half have been made since 2000 - which means not only how popular the topic is now, but how we're experiencing a glut of too many films in general.

Unlike other in-depth studies of the horror film, Kord won me over by page two. She says, "I've never been a fan of the academic credo that if a book is comprehensible to more than three people, the author must have sold out." What a breath of fresh air. So many authors seem to want to use a "Freudian lens" or apply another angle that the director clearly never intended. As viewers, we are allowed to read into a film what we wish, but more often than not a cigar is simply a cigar.

The book is divided into eight thematic chapters, starting quite appropriately with "birth". Kord references philosopher Julia Kristeva, who compares birth to an "alien intruder". Indeed, the parallels between pregnancy and parasites are easy to see. The horror practically writes itself. We explore "Demon Seed", and (of course) the mother of all pregnancy horror films, "Rosemary's Baby". Although Rosemary's titular baby may or may not be seen as a parasite, her whole situation is terrifying, as her husband, neighbors and doctor start to see her as nothing more than an incubator - no individual identity at all. The most interesting film discussed (briefly) in this section is "Alien", not typically thought of as a film about pregnancy. But, indeed, the "face huggers" can be seen as symbolic of rape, and then being forced to give birth to a rapist's baby. And, when the victim is male, this scenario takes on an even more abnormal twist.

The section on "family" raises the idea that unconditional love can be a bad thing. In "The Good Son" (other seen as a thriller rather than horror, but the line is thinner than many would admit) we have a very bad kid (Macaulay Culkin), but is the mother willing to believe her beloved child could be evil? Does the "natural" son get more love than the adopted son, even if one is clearly a better child? We also have the idea of step-parents who can't decide if their new children are evil or if it's just their skewed perception. This was a focus of "The Innocents", but has been raised many times since. It's an effective plot device - if done right, it can even leave the viewer guessing if the kids are trouble or if the narrator may be unreliable due to mental defect. Kord briefly touches on "Halloween" in this chapter, and how the neglect of a family can be a catalyst - indeed, young Michael Myers is "born" when he is left unattended, and the remainder of the film punishes babysitters who don't properly care for their wards.

The "nature" chapter seemed odd at first, because I didn't see the connection. But it is made very clear in the context of "Pet Sematary". The idea of "evil children" can come about as a result of going against nature - the "natural" thing to do is to let dead things stay dead, and we see what happens when people tamper with this. But "nature" can also evoke a connection between children and Mother Nature. In "Children of the Corn", the god that the children follow (He Who Walks Behind the Rows) is one with the corn (Nature), and adults are

Gavin Schmitt



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punished for their destruction of Nature through pesticides and other things. Only children can be seen as innocent, even if they happen to be killers. (Oddly, Kord even mentions "Evil Dead" in this chapter. The nature aspect is obvious, but where are there any children in the film?)

We have a section on "science" which makes sense, what with all the cloning and genetic engineering that involves children in movies. One of the focal points of the chapter is "The Brood", which is science gone wrong in a very unique way. Kord says the movie "is perhaps one of the most written-about science horror films ever made", which tells me that she and I are clearly reading different things. For me, there is never enough written about David Cronenberg's films. Kord's reading of "It's Alive" (and its sequels) is quite clever. The films suggest that the mutant babies may be the next step in evolution so humanity can survive pollution and radiation... and Kord points out that humanity would rather genetically modify their own children than stop polluting or dropping atomic bombs. Sadly, this is probably true in real life and not just in a Larry Cohen satire.

"Religion" is a chapter just brimming with potential. Horror and religion (especially Roman Catholicism) often go hand in hand. Kord quickly reminds us that "the unholy trinity" of "Rosemary's Baby", "The Exorcist" and "The Omen" are all blockbuster films, hugely influential, and feature children. One of the films closely looked at is "Communion" (or "Alice, Sweet Alice") and there could be no better choice. The Catholic imagery and iconography is bursting from the screen, and (whether Kord knows it or not) the director had a bone to pick with the Church – he had actually been excommunicated for his prior film, "Deep Sleep". Also getting a mention is "Frailty", which is a great ethical thriller in the vein of "God Told Me To". A father teaches his son to kill "demons" that look like ordinary people. It's a shocker and a great blend of children and religion – if it's true, the film justifies the murder of people by a child. Yikes! And if it isn't true, it may be even worse... a parent convincing their child that it's right to kill innocent people!

Without diving into "theory", the most creative chapter is "Consumption", by which Kord means consumerism, not gluttony. She makes an interesting argument that "The Bad Seed" is actually a story about greed, rather than what most people assume: a girl who has inherited an "evil gene". The killings of the film are driven by greed and envy rather than any abstract impulse. Could this be? More obvious is "Child's Play", where the villain is a toy. A working mother, who can barely afford to live, feels obligated to buy toys for her son. Why do we, as a society, feel this must be the case – that love must be proven with presents? As consumers, they are "punished". Kord draws a parallel between this film and "Amityville Horror", noting that the family of that story is buying a house beyond their means, and then gets punished for that decision. Whether or not this was intended by the writers, it's an interesting analysis. "Gremlins" is also covered briefly. I wish this was a bigger subject of the chapter, because director Joe Dante has gone on record as saying the film (and especially its sequel) is exactly about consumerism. A deeper look would have been helpful.

"Abuse" covers "The Ring", "Carrie" (where Kord shows how one abuse leads to another) and the much overlooked "Hard Candy". That last one is painful to watch, but in a good way. And the "Play" chapter shows when play goes bad. "Mikey", where a child kills with his toys, or "Devil Times Five" where the games are inappropriate, to say the least. One could probably include "Home Alone" here, though it's hardly a horror film unless we reinterpret it as a home invasion film (which is fair) rather than a light-hearted John Hughes Christmas comedy.

At the end, the book claims to cover 130 different films involving children and horror. I didn't personally count, but I have no doubt that 130 is a reasonably close estimate, because the book is packed about as tightly as you could ever want. And yet, it never seems dense or boring. Kord has succeeded in presenting a new way to look at horror without boring the audience or throwing unnecessary jargon at us that would have the films' creators shaking their heads.

And, perhaps best of all, she has added a few more films to my must-see list.

To order a copy of "Little Horrors", you can go to your local book store or Amazon, or you can order from the publisher directly. McFarland can be found at www.mcfarlandpub.com or you can reach the order line at (800)253-2187.

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