



Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love a Child Molester

Reading the bile that many of my fellow critics and fans have heaped on the new NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET has led me to some reasonably deep soul-searching on the issue of what it means to be a critic, or at least the kind of critic I have become. Not much of an issue in a sea of bloggers and self-pronounced pundits, but perhaps a worthy endeavor for a man who would like to consider himself spiritual.

As a friend recently remarked, “I make a reasonably good skeptic, but I’d make a lousy cynic.” I hope the same can be said of me in the way I look at film. Because film is for people, and not for itself. Which is to say, I don’t believe in art for its own sake—excepting that the sake in question is someone’s, and not that of the piece of plaster or collection of ones and zeros that make up the art. A picture can’t appreciate itself; nor can a film, or an album, or a film review. Neither can it create itself. The effect of it, the sacrifice and skill required to make it, have to be received, or the cheese stands alone, as it were. It might be great cheese, but all it’s going to do over time is rot, get eaten by rats and disappear into the dust of history—presumably forgotten. All that really remains of it are the eternal truths on which it is based or which it evokes. It is there to shadow something else more important. Whether others value what it shadows is another matter entirely. This is the essence of spirituality, a sense of the eternal value of individuals and truth.

Which is exactly what the new NIGHTMARE does. It shadows something far more important, and I find it curious that there hasn’t been more comment on that important something.

Look, I understand the purpose of a bad review, even the necessity of it. But too many critics lack the ability to step outside their perceived role into a larger view of what a critic is and does in the 21st century. And the problem is that the things about the NIGHTMARE remake that make it worth thinking about, and commenting on to the larger public, are important even if they have little to do with the elements critics place at the center of their discourse.

Beyond the Pale: Thoughts on the “NIGHTMARE” Reboot

Written by Dave Canfield

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The downside of this film is its forgettable characters, the complete lack of suspense or style generated by director Samuel Bayer, a forgettable score, to say the least (remember the original one? *That* was a score), and the replacement of the earlier films’ grim-fairy-tale atmosphere with a leaner, meaner but ultimately “meh” sense of seen-it-before ultraviolence.

But here’s what I liked about the film, what made it so spiritually provocative to me—and, I’m guessing, what might have resonated with other people, even though they, for reasons that will become apparent as you read on, probably won’t willingly share or talk about it much:

In this movie, Freddy really is a child molester.

They gave lip service to it in the old series, but that was about all. In his new incarnation, Freddy is the real deal. And one of the big reasons he comes to life in his “children’s” dreams, and is even able to kill them, isn’t just because of what their parents did, but because that’s what child abuse does to its victims until its specter is dealt with. It ruins sleep, wrecks lives and breeds confusion, chaos and a lifestyle of victimhood and victimization. It doesn’t matter if you are the victim or the perpetrator.



Jackie Earle Haley is dynamically foul here when Bayer has the common sense to linger on him, instead of cutting away for another been-there-done-that “boo.” And his final scenes in the remake beat the original films pre-HOME ALONE booby traps and psychobabble ending by a mile. It’s the only part of the new film that really works, but it works quite well, and that’s because this remake does the one thing the old series never did—it addresses the 800-pound gorilla in the room: At some point in time, Freddy Krueger violated the innocence of a bunch of defenseless kids.

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This movie doesn't like Freddy. The heroes in this flick are vanilla, forgettable cardboard, but Freddy is there to be hated. The film gets at an important truth that anyone who has ever been the victim of this type of crime understands. Freddy is and really always has been a loser. He isn't some cartoony devil figure who does standup for a living. He's evil. He doesn't mean anyone any good. He doesn't deserve anyone's admiration, or sympathy. He's the sick bastard son of 1,000 maniacs we love to hate, but somewhere down the line, we forgot to hate him and turned him into a harmless cartoon.

I was happy for once to see a really bad movie take the top spot at the box office, no matter what any of my critic friends think about it. I hope this kickstarts the franchise but good. I hope we get more substance, better direction, better characters and a sense of dread instead of constant jolts next time. But I hope Freddy doesn't turn back into a standup comedian. While so many are railing (rightly) against the hypocritical and ineffective response to clergy abuse of children, let's not forget we've made a cult hero out of one of the most vile sexual villains of all time.

What does that mean?

For one thing, although we need our bad guys, we need them to occasionally be of the mustache-twirling variety. Nothing wrong with that. I have a lot of Freddy memorabilia myself, including a custom glove autographed by Robert Englund and a Premium Format 1/4-scale model signed by Wes Craven. I've seen all the sequels multiple times, and like them a lot. But this new film reminded me there are a host of horror movies that deal effectively with the idea of child abuse—LADY IN WHITE (1988) and IN A GLASS CAGE (1987) among them. Though these follow other powerful themes, they do much more than use child abuse to get where they want to go, choosing instead to showcase the pain and misery of this particular sin in ways that take it seriously.

An argument can be made that the NIGHTMARE remake is bad enough to be accused of simply using the abuse as a plot point, but that's undercut by the undeniable fact that it's interesting to see a major franchise take the bold move of really re-demonizing its lead demon. It shows an awareness that the horror genre, like any other, can be aware of the world it is produced in, at least slightly concerned with it and willing to take a few risks in order to truly show that the horrors in it always outweigh those on the silver screen.

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