

## Exclusive Interview: Wes Craven on "MY SOUL TO TAKE"

Written by Samuel Zimmerman  
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In considering the true “masters of horror,” it would be foolish if the name Wes Craven wasn’t immediately mentioned. Making films since the early 1970s, the director has managed to craft three landmark films of terror in three consecutive decades, amidst a lengthy filmography of other works that are often frightening, witty, intelligent and surprising. This Friday, the first feature he has both written and directed in over 10 years, MY SOUL TO TAKE, hits theaters, and the legendary filmmaker sat with Fango to discuss recurring themes, coming of age and his own life and beliefs—and how they shaped his newest offering.

**FANGORIA:** What is it that brings you back to this darker side of suburbia?

**WES CRAVEN:** I don’t know. I literally don’t know; the idea was just about a man who lived in this particular suburb, so that’s kind of where the idea was set. I did like the idea of going back to that territory. I thought it was very powerful, and the idea of “Main Street” has become so important in politics. That was another reason to explore the beautiful town and its dark underside. Beyond that, I don’t think there was any conscious...I didn’t say, “I’ve got to return to my roots” or anything like that. You know, my roots are also out in the desert and other places too.

**FANG:** A heavy aspect of MY SOUL TO TAKE is “the sins of the father” and how they weigh down on children. Looking at your films with younger casts, do you resent adulthood and what it can do to people?

**CRAVEN:** I think it’s a fact of life that the actions of previous generations affect us profoundly, and quite often what they do is hidden from us. I think that’s one of the huge disadvantages of being a part of any generation. You don’t quite know what people did before you that has caused the basic world you’re living in to be what it is. I didn’t know until 9/11 how deeply resentments go back 500 years to the Crusades, and then if you think about the history of the Native American peoples both in North and South America—I just finished reading a book about a Spanish expedition that went across the top of the Gulf of Mexico, and how they just routinely killed people and terrorized them and made them tell ’em where the gold was and whatever. So

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much of that is hidden in the basic "land of the free, home of the brave" sort of thing. It's important to know these darker sides so that you kind of know where you want to move your brain—your culture, if you can—more toward a better direction.

FANG: There seem to be a lot of references to your other work in MY SOUL TO TAKE. What was your intention with that?

CRAVEN: It wasn't intentional, but it doesn't surprise me. What were some of the references you saw?

FANG: It may be stretching a bit, but a small comment about Haiti, the dream imagery, there's a conversation toward the end that very much reminded me of Billy and Stu's exchanges late in SCREAM...

CRAVEN: Well, that was very much a deal-with-the-devil sort of thing in my mind, but it does have that aspect, and I suppose SCREAM had that aspect of a deal with the devil too. That's interesting; when you mention it, I think, 'Oh yeah, sure.' That makes me half-remember other places where I was kind of... In a sense, the audience has become old friends. A lot of them have been with me for a very long time, so sometimes there is that kind of cross-referencing of, 'I know you know what this is, because we're film friends.' I try not to do it so that it's terribly self-conscious.



FANG: When you've done something like the SCREAM series—with SCREAM 4 coming in April—which takes on film and horror on a meta and commentary level, is it harder or does it challenge you more when you want to make something more traditionally narrative, like MY

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### SOUL TO TAKE?

**CRAVEN:** I really feel like in some ways, *MY SOUL TO TAKE* is so different from anything I've seen. It's not ripe for deconstruction yet, but I do feel like the ironic-deconstruction business has been done now too. I mean, *SCREAM 4* has its own approach to that. It does take into account that it has been done, and asks the question of, what's coming next? That was very much a thought in my mind as I was doing [*SOUL*]*—do something you haven't seen before. It might have elements of NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET and so forth, but the idea of souls and also a male lead as opposed to female lead—I haven't touched on that since SHOCKER. That's more of what was governing my thinking, just following through this child-father idea and the linkage, and of being raised in a family where many important truths were hidden. Innocence, in a sense, is at a certain point very destructive to your growth. There are things you have to know and do.*

It was very interesting; Dennis Iliadis, who directed the *LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT* remake, said, "You know, in Europe, we feel like America's pretense of innocence is an insult to us." I said, "What do you mean by that?" He said, "Life is so much more complex for you to act like you're innocent." So I gave that line to Fang [Emily Meade] in *SOUL* because I found that a really interesting concept. And even for the quasi-parent in this story, to keep a child innocent so that child doesn't know the real history of the family, is debilitating, both to the child and to the people who keep the secret.

That was an interesting thing to explore. Part of my own family history is, my father died when I was very young. We were all kind of afraid of him, but I can't ever remember him laying a hand on me; he was just scary. I think he just had a really bad temper. He was not around the house a lot when I was a little kid. When we were adults, my siblings and I—especially my brother and I—tried to find out who my father was. Not by name, we knew all that, but what sort of person he really was. And it was like *RASHOMON*; everyone had a different depiction of who he was. "Oh, he was a real son of a bitch." "He was the most wonderful guy." And we came away from it like, "We don't know who our father was even more now."

So I liked that element in this film of a son searching for a father and finally having his real family history unveiled. To me, it was kind of close to the bone. It's a little bit like *SCREAM* with Sid finding out what her mother was really like—not the angelic figure she had imagined.

**FANG:** Given the soul theme of the new film, and having recently rewatched *NEW*

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NIGHTMARE, and taking into account LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT's origin in an old folk tale—do you find yourself still inspired by mythology and the like?

CRAVEN: Not now, but I did when I was teaching. I taught courses in humanities at what was basically a technical school, and our job was to basically teach the history of Western civilization in art and history and everything in two semesters—it was ridiculous. We started all the way back with the Greeks, so I reread all of that literature, and first of all, it's remarkable to realize it has been preserved and it important in all cultures for over 2,000 years, and some of it, like THE ODYSSEY, was first told orally 5,000 years ago and then written down at some point. These are important stories, and even in modern literature and theater, you go to Tennessee Williams and find stories built around Greek mythology.

So these tales have captured something that on the surface seems very bizarre—nothing like we've really experienced—but underneath deals with elements of the human psyche that are deeply buried in our hearts and minds. Not that they're going to come out, necessarily, but they will emerge in somebody you know, a parent or an uncle, or a nation or whatever. I mean, who could have guessed Germany would have done what they did? People, just ordinary people, did those things, and that sort of warning in history is something you have to pay attention to. So I just find it interesting, and I think having a mother who was kind of—and God bless her, she was a widow and raised three kids on very little money—but her thing was, "Don't bring up something that's unpleasant," and so we never really knew about a lot of important stuff—and we knew we didn't know about it, but we didn't know what it was.

That, I think, drove me to a lifetime of wanting to know what everything is. Voracious reading; I subscribed to 30 magazines and was constantly gobbling information because I felt so robbed. I felt like Bug [MY SOUL TO TAKE's hero, played by Max Thieriot], and that character is very much built on my sense of being in the predicament of being innocent and not wanting to be, because I wanted to know what was going on. I wanted to know what it was to be a man, but I didn't have a father. All these things were mysteries to me, and in a sense, we all have these feelings, but I think it was kind of accentuated by being raised by a widow, in a fundamentalist church where you couldn't see movies and all those things. So much was forbidden, you know. This is a story that in many ways is quite personal. NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET is also; it has that sense of what really went on in a family, where the parents were murderers and they've never told their children.

There used to be a monologist, Spalding Gray—he was a very interesting guy, and would just come on stage and talk about his life. And in one of his shows, he said, "Everything hidden, rots." Then he went on to describe what he was talking about. His mother was a Christian

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scientist and he never knew what was going on as a kid, and it always turned out to fester and cause trouble that wouldn't have been there otherwise if someone had just said, "This is what happened." So that's my belief about things that are hidden from children to save their tender minds or whatever. At a certain point, it becomes a knee-jerk thing that one generation does to another, and they never tell the kids because it would make them look bad. And it can really inhibit the growth of people and of cultures. Even history is this attempt to find out what the hell really went on. I mean, who knows what goes on with our government? I have no idea; practically everything's secret. There's no chance we'll know what's happening for 50 years at least. There are still things from the Roosevelt era that are classified—it's amazing. So much is hidden, a lot of it just to cover up the bloody fingerprints.



FANG: The kids in the film are actually quite young, 15-16, a lesser age than most slasher casts. The murders are quite brutal, and almost even more so because of their ages; they're still innocent. Was that ever a problem in the developing and making of the film?

CRAVEN: No; as a matter of fact, the kids started out as 13, and then at a certain point, my wife [Iya Labunka], who was one of the producers on the movie, said, "We're never going to be able to pull this off. First of all, we won't be able to work them enough hours, and 16 is perfect because it's Sweet 16 and there's still the innocence, but it's closer to adulthood. As an adult, there's always that little voice that cringes at the fact that you're telling a story about the death and destruction of kids, but I always think of them ultimately as symbols and elements of our own personalities—the innocent parts of ourselves—and they're not real kids getting killed. It's part of a story about the death of innocence and what happens to people who aren't aware of the threats that are around them. At least, that's how I get myself through the day.

But you know, it's a strange business to be in at all, making this kind of film for most of my career. I believe that's why there's so much humor in my movies, to give a little balance or a little relief. Otherwise, it's hard to go into those spaces; it's hard to put yourself in there, imagining these sorts of things, because you kind of have to get your mind there, and it's not a comfortable place to be.

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FANG: How hard is it to find that balance between the horror and humor?

CRAVEN: Typically, I'm funny and not scary. That's basically who I am. So I have to kind of hold myself back, in a way. Usually, I write more things that are funny that I take out, but I think it's a human instinct. There's humor that comes from prisons, there's humor in combat, a lot of humor is about something that scares us deeply. A man walks into a doctor's office, and the doctor says, "You have two days to live." That's horrible, but there are innumerable jokes about that basic situation, or jokes about mothers-in-law, or sex, all sorts of things—racial tensions, geographical, geopolitical, Polish jokes. It's all based on things we're uneasy about, and I think horror films work the same way, in the sense that they're very close together, horror and humor. It's almost like a shriek of laughter is second cousin to a scream of terror, and vice versa. The joke and the scary movie all build up tension from things that we're scared of, and then you start to feel like it's present, but you don't know where it's coming from and then suddenly, Bam!, the punchline or the knife comes down. So I've never felt like they're two different sorts of genres.

[WARNING: This last question could be considered a very minor spoiler]

FANG: You've discussed the order in which you've killed people in films, that it's very important to break a circle of support. There's a particular character in SOUL, Penelope, who dies early on. She's a very God-fearing and pious and could hold an emotional connection with Bug. Seeing as you've said the film is partly autobiographical, does that speak to your own relationship with God at all?

CRAVEN: Yeah. Formally, I don't believe in God, because I think people's minds are too limited to even have a concept of whether there is a God, and I believe religions have done much more harm than they've done good. But anyway, [that character], because she is tied into the spirit world in some way—she acknowledges it and lives in it as well as in the everyday world—is kind of like Cassandra. [SPOILER ALERT] She can see a bit of something that normal people can't, and it's very interesting in the woods when she looks up and says, "I know you're up there, but I know he's down here." And at the very, very end, Bug looks up and says almost the same words, basically: 'I know you're up there and I know we're down here.' So it's not "he's down here"—the killer, the villain, anymore—it's "we."

That's one of the great tensions of human existence: that we have, almost universally, religions that try to comfort us, but when you really think about it, why would God allow what happened in WWII; how can that be a God of love? So that character was the person who speaks about the

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spiritual within the Judeo-Christian ethos, and then by the end it's just Bug with a realization that if there is a God, He doesn't really intervene in the horrible things that happen on Earth very much at all, so we kind of have to embody it all ourselves.

For more on MY SOUL TO TAKE, look for our review this week and check out our feature on the film in Fango #298 (on sale later this month). And for more Wes Craven, give a read to my retrospective series on the director where I tackle [THE PEOPLE UNDER THE STAIRS](#) , [CHILLER](#) ,  
[THE SERPENT AND THE RAINBOW](#) ,  
[SCREAM 2](#) ,  
&  
[WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE](#) .

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