

## Peter Jackson Makes His “BONES”

Written by Abbie Bernstein  
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One would expect a film with supernatural elements in which the pivotal event is the murder of a 14-year-old girl by a serial killer to be a horror film, a thriller, a revenge story or some combination of all of the above. Yet *THE LOVELY BONES* (now out on DVD and Blu-ray from Paramount) is none of the above.

Based on Alice Sebold's best-selling novel, this latest movie from director Peter Jackson, who co-wrote the script with Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens (his collaborators on *LORD OF THE RINGS* and *KING KONG*), follows Susie Salmon, played by Saoirse Ronan, as she negotiates the afterlife while watching her family get on without her. Susie's father (Mark Wahlberg), mother (Rachel Weisz), younger sister (Rose McIver) and little brother (Christian Thomas Ashdale) all deal with her loss in different ways—while neighbor Mr. Harvey (Stanley Tucci), who murdered Susie, appears to have gotten away with his crime.

Jackson is no stranger to making movies with violence—after all, before *LORD OF THE RINGS* and *KING KONG*, there were *BAD TASTE*, *MEET THE FEEBLES* and *DEAD ALIVE* (a.k.a. *BRAINDEAD*). However, he explains, *THE LOVELY BONES* is different. “There were artistic reasons, there were moral reasons, there were practical reasons” for keeping *BONES* subtle, he says. “The film is about a teenager and her experiences. She's murdered, she goes into an afterlife experience and we wanted to make a movie that teenagers could watch. Fran [Jackson's partner in life as well as business] and I have a daughter who's [about] Susie's age, and we wanted Katie to be able to see this film. There are a lot of positive aspects to it and it's not something that I wanted to shield our daughter from, and so it was important for us to not go into R-rated territory at all.



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“Also, I never regarded this as being a movie about a murder,” he continues. “If we had shot any aspect of that particular sequence in any way, then it would have stigmatized the film. Movies are such a powerful medium—the music and effects and acting and performances and editing and lighting and camerawork—that to show a 14-year-old girl being murdered, no matter how briefly, would completely swing the balance of the film, and it would frankly make it one that I wouldn’t want to watch. I would have no interest in seeing that on screen, and I would not want to see it. Every movie I make is a film I’d like to see. That’s very important. So the movie we did make is almost something like a crime mystery of what happens when you’re in this world of the subconscious, the world of the afterlife. Susie has to deal with what happened to her, and there’s a positive aspect to it, in the sense that she’s immortal and saying that there is no such thing as death. And all of those themes were what interested us.

“I’ve shot some pretty extreme things in my time—BAD TASTE and MEET THE FEEBLES and BRAINDEAD—and there’s a certain style and a sense of humor that I believe you can use to get away with that,” Jackson notes. “But to do anything that depicts violence especially toward a young person in a way that’s serious—I have no interest in filming it at all, it would be repulsive. So there were a variety of reasons. But we felt very determined from the beginning that THE LOVELY BONES should be PG-13.”

Susan Sarandon, who plays Susie’s flamboyant grandmother, notes that there’s also a narrative reason we don’t see the murder. “[Susie is] the narrator, and she disassociates at that point,” the actress says. “To show what happened, you’d lose that whole element of her confusion and her displacement.”

“Exactly,” Jackson agrees. “One of the things we did, which is different from the novel in the way we structured the screenplay, was have her fleeing from her murder. We really liked that aspect of the way the story is told, in the sense that, at the point when her spirit becomes disconnected from her body, she’s running: She’s running across that field, she’s running into the streets, Susie doesn’t know what has happened to her. She’s literally confused, and now she finds herself in the ‘in-between,’ which is essentially the world of dreams, the subconscious, in this confused state, and she has to put the pieces together. So that dictated very strongly that seeing any form of murder was not something we wanted to do, because of the way we restructured the story. She herself is confused, and has to put the pieces of the puzzle together as the film goes on.”

Young actress Ronan, already an Oscar nominee for her role in ATONEMENT, reveals that the

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most intense sequence for her was not the one leading up to Susie’s murder, but rather one in which Susie connects with other souls. “It did get very emotional, and I was drowned in the scene for quite a long time,” she recalls. “It was the barley field scene. That’s one of my favorite parts of the film, and definitely my favorite one to shoot. It was so emotional, and I believe we did it for a whole day, maybe even more. Everyone on set felt the same way—we were all very touched emotionally. I’ll always remember shooting it.”

Tucci acknowledges that he had a tough time playing the ordinary-seeming yet murderously predatory Mr. Harvey. “It was hard in every respect,” he says. “Pete knows I was very reticent to take the part at first, because I have kids and I can’t really read anything or watch anything that has children getting harmed. I don’t like things about serial killers, and there’s so much information and documentaries out there, but a lot of it is just gratuitous or almost pornographic. But THE LOVELY BONES is not that. This is a beautiful story about an exploration of loss, and Pete and Fran and Phil and I had long conversations before we started working together. I felt very safe with them, that there would be nothing gratuitous and that we were going to create a real person together in Mr. Harvey. The more real he is, and the more subtle he is, the more terrifying he is. The more banal he is, the more frightening he is.

“At the beginning,” Tucci continues, “it was very hard to drop it at the end of the day, particularly when I was fresh off the research and that research was repulsive. But eventually, once I understood who he was and I found him, then I could drop it at the end of the day. But there’s no doubt it was the most difficult thing I’ve ever done as an actor. I looked forward to going into the makeup trailer, taking everything off and having a martini at the end of every day. At the beginning of every day, too, as a matter of fact,” he jokes.

Not only did Tucci sport a wig and mustache to transform into Mr. Harvey, but he wore contact lenses as well. “I didn’t think my eyes should be the eyes of this guy,” he explains. “Also, he needed to be more sort of, I suppose, quintessentially American-looking, so the skin tone was changed and the hair was added, and the eyes seemed to be appropriate for him. If you look at, let’s say, the scene with Mike Imperioli [as the police detective investigating Susie’s disappearance] when he comes in and asks some questions, I’m hoping that the eyes there look sort of normal. Then in certain close-ups, like in reflections in the mirror when [Mr. Harvey is] sitting in his car, the eyes take on a different quality because of the way it’s lit, and because of my horrible thoughts behind them.”

“I’ve done a lot of movies with contact lenses in actors’ eyes,” Jackson adds, “and to me, they change the color of your eye. If something is going on with the character’s eyes, it’s because of the performance. As a filmmaker, I like shooting extreme close-ups occasionally, because that’s

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a technique you can use to really get inside somebody’s head. Stanley was playing a very dangerous and frightening character, so getting close to his eyes is a way of increasing the menace, because Stanley’s performance is giving back to us.”

As a director, Jackson says *THE LOVELY BONES* appealed to him because it was something he hadn’t done before. “The only thing as a filmmaker that I am scared of is repetition,” he says. “I have no interest at all in doing the same thing over and over again. And that’s not to say I wouldn’t do another fantasy film or another splatter film one day—or another film with puppets—but it would be different. Certainly, it’s great to have a break and turn your mind to something fresh, and *THE LOVELY BONES* was a challenge. I’m sure most people would appreciate that things are immediately much more interesting and enjoyable if they’re difficult. If you decide that you’re going to take on a project that’s a year or two years, if it’s familiar or treading the same ground you’ve done before, it’s immediately going to be less interesting than taking on something that has new demands and a fresh challenge.”

He found just such a challenge in Sebold’s novel, which had previously been developed as a movie by award-winning Scottish director Lynne Ramsey before Jackson and co. took over, completing a script before a studio was attached. “*THE LOVELY BONES* was a wonderful puzzle; it’s a terrific book that affects you emotionally,” Jackson says. “It doesn’t have that structure that immediately makes the film obvious in your mind. The book affects you on an emotional level, not a story level as such, and you delve into it and as a filmmaker, you figure out a way in which you can tell the story on film. In my mind, there’s no such thing as a perfect adaptation of a novel. The masterwork is the book. Alice Sebold’s novel is the work that has everything in it—every character, every subplot—and that’s the way that you should experience the story in its most pure form. A film adaptation of any novel, especially *THE LOVELY BONES*, is only going to be a souvenir, an impression of aspects of the book, so to me, to adapt it is not a question of producing a carbon copy. It’s impossible.

“To include everything, the film would [have to] be five or six hours long,” he continues. “It’s a personal impression. Philippa Boyens, Fran Walsh and myself read the book and responded to it, especially the emotional themes and the comforting value of the book, and things it had to say about the afterlife, which is very personal to anybody. That’s what appealed to us, and our adaptation is very much just elements of the novel restructured. You don’t make the movie for the fans of the book—you just can’t do it. You take 20 different filmmakers, give them a book like this—any book, really, but especially *THE LOVELY BONES*—and you’ll have 20 completely different films, which is interesting. So certainly, the idea of doing something that’s a challenging new topic is absolutely of great interest.”

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