

Written by Michael Gingold
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British director James Watkins has a major horror release hitting theaters tomorrow with *THE WOMAN IN BLACK*, and Michael Fassbender has been winning raves for his performances in *SHAME* and David Cronenberg’s *A DANGEROUS METHOD* while becoming a big-ticket fantasy star in *X-MEN: FIRST CLASS* and the upcoming *PROMETHEUS*. So the time seems right to revisit our review of their less widely seen shocker *EDEN LAKE*, coupled with another chiller released at the same time, *THE HAUNTING OF MOLLY HARTLEY*...

As part of a bumper crop of Halloween theatrical releases, two movies dealing with young people have arrived—one that explores and elicits anxieties over out-of-control teenagers, and one aimed directly and simplistically at the mindset of that age. Guess which one is better? And guess which one is getting the wider break?

EDEN LAKE, the directorial debut of *MY LITTLE EYE* co-scripiter James Watkins, is slinking into very token theatrical release like a beaten child—in the New York area, its sole venue is somewhere in Queens—prior to its wider DVD exposure in January. Like so many films granted such negligible big-screen treatment, it deserves better. In the film, it’s the children who deliver the beatings, as writer/helmer Watkins presents a scenario ripped from British headlines about violent youth sometimes referred to as “chavs,” junior hooligans who have no respect for authority or compunctions about reacting violently when their actions are questioned or challenged.



The title refers to a luxury housing tract that’s about to be put up at the site of an old quarry, and there’s a subtext about its adolescent villains striking back at the moneyed invasion of their blue-collar domain. The irony is that Steve (a solid Michael Fassbender), who brings girlfriend Jenny (Kelly Reilly) on a camping weekend at the quarry, is also regretful about the march of

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progress overwhelming the swimming area he so enjoys. But he never has a chance to explain that to the group of teens who soon invade the idyllic beach, disturbing the couple with loud music on a radio and a threatening dog. Steve confronts the gang about the intrusion, and things don't go well, and then they start to go very unwell, to the point where barbed wire, knives and broken glass are involved.

Before things become severely harrowing, the narrative makes an unwise literal and figurative detour that saps both tension and plausibility from the narrative, before getting back on track for a second half that doesn't offer too many new wrinkles to the survival-in-the-woods subgenre, but lays out its brutal events with compelling panache. There's more than a touch of THE DESCENT's evocative atmosphere of isolation here—no surprise given that producer Christian Colson, production designer Simon Bowles, editor Jon Harris and composer David Julyan all encore from Neil Marshall's modern masterpiece, and it's equally unsurprising that Watkins was tapped to script the upcoming DESCENT 2. Unlike the possessed/alien kids of many past chillers, the “little terrors” here are simply products of their neglectful/abusive environment, a theme that grounds EDEN LAKE's terrors in the uncomfortably realistic and familiar, and which is hammered home at the finale, which is despairing in more than one way.

EDEN LAKE has sparked some on-line debate as to whether it's a realistic or responsible mirror of the real-life problems with violent youth in Britain. However one stands on that issue—or whether you have a stand at all—that certainly gives the film a greater level of interest than THE HAUNTING OF MOLLY HARTLEY, whose only Internet arguments will likely center on whether Chace Crawford is cuter here or on TV's GOSSIP GIRL. A smattering of blood and one gratuitous F-word notwithstanding, this may serve as a serviceable chiller for its target audience, but for anyone with any experience with the supernatural genre, it's a thoroughly by-the-numbers experience.



They'll have an idea of what they're in for during the film's prologue, in which a teen girl

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following a series of notes to an abandoned cabin in the woods is startled by a) a flock of birds suddenly flying up in front of her and then b) her boyfriend, each accompanied by a loud burst of music. Something legitimately threatening does soon befall the poor girl before we're introduced to the eponymous Molly Hartley (Haley Bennett), who is plagued by nightmares of the time her mother tried to kill her with a pair of scissors to her chest. Molly and her dad (Jake Weber) have moved to a new town to “get away” from their troubled past—but not very far, apparently, since the sanitarium where Mom resides is just outside town—and the trauma of adjusting to a new school is nothing compared to the nightmares Molly suffers about that tragic attack, not to mention the nosebleeds at inopportune times and strange voices that plague her in and out of class.

Then, in the lopsided script by John Travis and Rebecca Sonnenshine, those paranormal problems seemingly get resolved by medical means so that the movie can then focus on Molly's more pedantic problems with her classmates. There are seeds of a couple of promising ideas here—how a young person recovers emotionally from an attack by her own parent, the pull for Molly's attention between a religious classmate (Shanna Collins) and a rebellious one (Shannon Woodward)—but director Mickey Liddell and the writers seem as reticent to explore truly dark psychological territory as they are to push the horror beyond what the MPAA will allow all ages to see. Before the supernatural asserts itself again via a random and unconvincing scene of exposition, Liddell attempts to jolt us with a loud, barking dog and even the day's mail dropping—*wham!*—through the front-door slot in Molly's house.

There are moments, when Collins' Alexis attempts to convert Molly to “save” her in more ways than one, that *THE HAUNTING OF MOLLY HARTLEY* suggests an adaptation of one of those Christian-lit young-adult novels that proselytize in the guise of scaring their teen readers. But the movie can't seem to make up its mind how it feels about religion, just like it can't decide whether it's more concerned with the terrors of growing up or those that come with being cursed. And nowhere does *HAUNTING* seem more confused than in its final scene, which either was hastily tacked on in an unconvincing attempt to end everything on an up note, or possesses a sense of sneaky irony present nowhere else in the film.

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HAUNTING: 🍷🍷👁️👁️