

## ENTERTAINMENT

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April 29, 2012

**Criminal Minds: Of Dolls & Murder and J. Edgar**

**Two films about unusual key figures in the development of forensic science; one a low-budget documentary, the other a Hollywood film by a legendary director – cue the CSI music, dramatically yank off your sunglasses and prepare to investigate.**

In the age of the internet, it often feels like all of history's fascinating strange true-life stories have been told, but then a documentary like *Of Dolls & Murder* comes along to remind you that there's weirdness aplenty waiting to be exposed. The title of the film (just released on DVD and available on the official site, [here](#)), refers to a series of eighteen dioramas, nicknamed "the Nutshells," that recreate real crime scenes, and which were created by Frances Glessner Lee (1878–1962) in the 1940s and 50s. Made on a scale of one inch to one foot, they are painstakingly detailed reproductions of bloody home invasions, bodies found in apartments or in the street that may or may not have fallen to foul play, possible (or perhaps staged?) suicides, and even a burned down cabin with a body inside – all complete with painted doll-corpses in various states of mutilation and decomposition. There are blood splatters, tiny props and other forensic evidence that mimic exactly the real crime scenes, as well. It's like looking at a line of dollhouses designed by Wednesday Addams.



*Of Dolls & Murder* takes us through the history of the Nutshells and Glessner herself. Fascinated by forensic science in a time when the field didn't exist and women were all but absent in policing, she used her influence and money as a prominent New England socialite to establish a Department of Legal Medicine, at Harvard. Over the years she donated books and large sums of money to it, and in 1943 started constructing the Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death, which were also given to the department, for the purpose of training policemen on how to read a crime scene. Eventually, the Nutshells became property of the Maryland Chief Medical Examiner's Office, and, amazingly, they are still used today for training. They're that effective.

The documentary delves into historical background and offers contemporary interviews with police officers, medical examiners, a CSI producer (the Nutshells inspired a storyline with a character called the Miniature Killer who would recreate crime scenes with dioramas), forensics students and more – which are broken up by sequences in which we get a close look at a particular Nutshell, so that viewers can try to piece together the gruesome events themselves. The filmmakers enlisted John Waters to narrate the movie, which keeps things pretty mirthful, given the morbid subject matter. (In a brief extra on the disc, Waters also waxes poetic about Glessner and why he finds the Nutshells so fascinating.)

There's not quite enough here for a feature-length doc, though, so to stretch it out to 70 minutes, there's a trip to the famed 'body farm' in Tennessee, where donated corpses are allowed to decomposed under different circumstances in order that researchers can study rates of decay, and there are interviews with some homicide police about their jobs. It's obvious padding, yet probably necessary to get a running time long enough for festivals. Regardless, there's a compelling tale within about a pioneering woman who helped immeasurably to advance forensic science through a very unlikely method.

One of the other figures in the advancement of forensic science is the subject of the latest Clint Eastwood movie, which also dropped on DVD and Blu-ray recently, from Warner Brothers: *J. Edgar*. At 137 minutes, it's a more than thorough look at the life of J. Edgar Hoover (1895 - to 1972). And by "more than thorough," I mean "boring as hell." I'm an unabashed Eastwood fan, but I haven't had so much trouble sitting through a movie in a long time. I've mentioned before that the poster for the movie, of star Leonardo DiCaprio looking like your dad chewing you out, is almost a warning to stay away, but like the Dukes of Hazzard seeing a "Bridge Out" sign, I just had to go for it and hope for the best...

There's no denying that Hoover was an interesting figure: a deeply closeted homosexual, suspected cross-dresser who founded the FBI and, like Glessner, key in making forensics a standard for crime scene investigation. The film covers his early days hunting down communists, using often questionable methods and unnecessary force. Then we see him rise to prominence by taking down high-profile crime bosses, creating the Federal Bureau of Investigation, solving the infamous, tragic [Lindberg baby kidnapping](#) and manipulating those around him by spying on them and collecting secret files. He remained the Director of the FBI for nearly 40 years, never shying away from the spotlight and absolutely unafraid to bully people to get what he wanted.

In other words, he was dick. Eastwood doesn't sugarcoat it, but he does attempt to humanize him by portraying his affection for his mother, his long, secretive relationship with his deputy, Clyde Tolson (Armie Hammer), and somewhat his amicable relationship with his long-term secretary Helen Gandy (Naomi Watts). You can certainly respect his work ethic, sympathize somewhat with how he grappled with his true identity in such an era, and his dedication to using science and experts to solve crimes makes for the best scenes in the film (such as when he turns a smokers lounge into a lab to study woodgrain in an effort to pinpoint the original of the ladder used in the Lindberg case). Like Glessner, he was almost comically straight-laced, commanding and dedicated, but there's no getting past his pettiness, manipulative nature, mean streak, abuses of his power, cowardice and, well, the sour weasel face that DiCaprio gives him – I just want to punch it. You can't structure a personal, sprawling biographical picture around someone so unlikable. It would've made more sense to tell the story from Helen's perspective, but she's pushed into the background, despite having an ear on everything Hoover did for four decades.

Making things worse is Eastwood's decision to severely under-light the movie, partly because he prefers a more natural look, and presumably because it fits the veil of secrecy that surrounded Hoover. But I was left wondering if the Blu-ray should've come with night vision goggles. Or maybe a can of Red Bull and an interesting book

to thumb through while it was playing.

If you want to learn about the development of forensic science and its role in fighting crime, there's plenty of vital historical info between *Of Dolls & Murder* and *J. Edgar*. Trust me, though, stick to the movie about the Nutshells and avoid the one about about the nut, otherwise a detective may be standing over your couch some time soon, trying to pinpoint at exactly what

time you died of boredom.

-Dave Alexander



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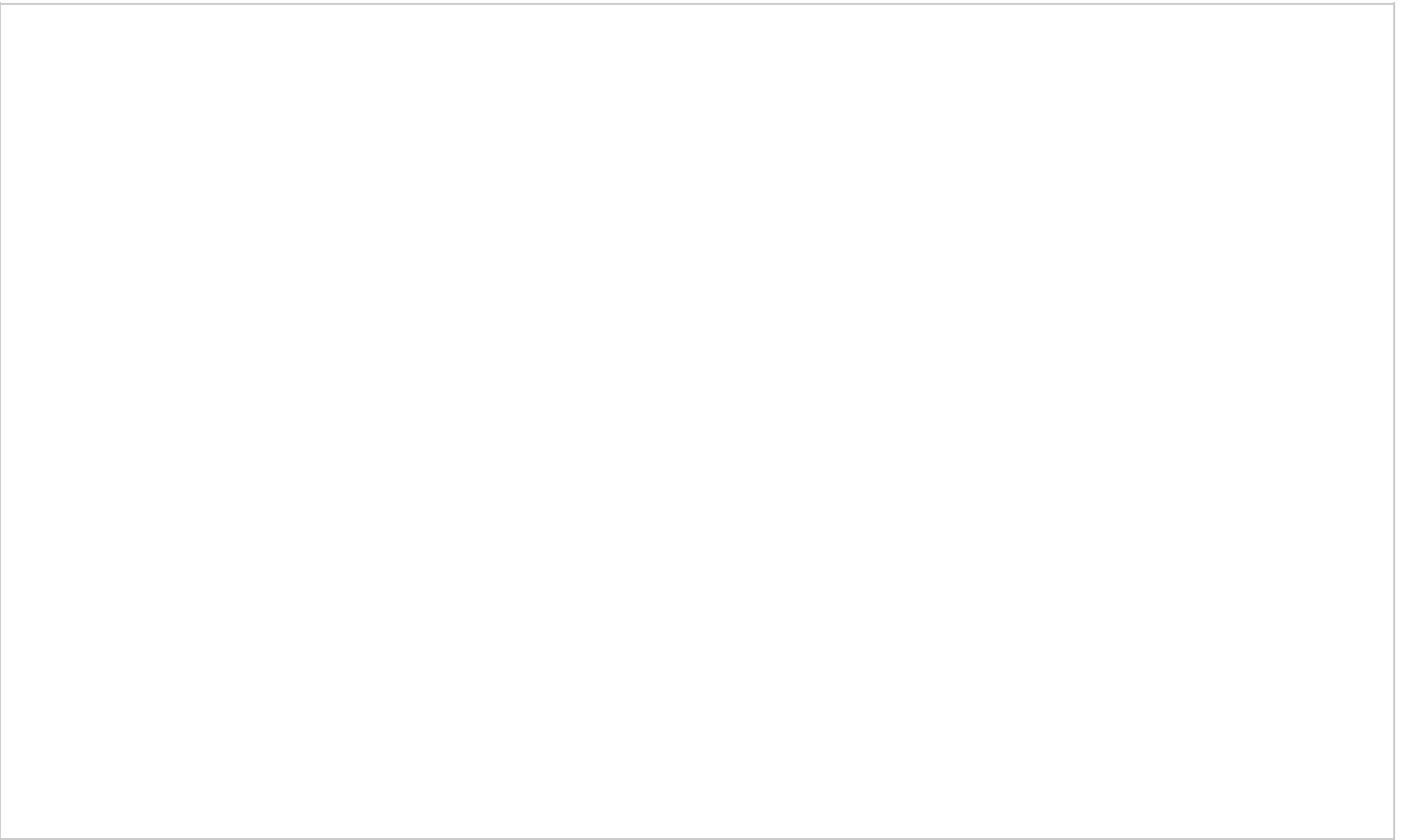
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Dave Alexander is the Editor in Chief of Toronto-based Rue Morgue magazine, which specializes in "horror in culture and entertainment." Originally from Edmonton, he holds a degree in Film and Media Studies from the University of Alberta, has made award-winning short films, worked as freelance writer for publications such as Spin and Maxim and currently programs a monthly movie night at T.O.'s Bloor Cinema. If you don't love The Big Lebowski, he doesn't want to be your friend.

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