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A woman with dark hair, wearing a blue and white striped short-sleeved shirt and a tan apron with floral embroidery, stands in a workshop. She is holding a long wooden plank horizontally in front of her. The background is dark and filled with wooden beams and tools, suggesting a carpenter's shop or a similar setting. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting her face and the apron.

THE WOMAN

CAST

Pollyanna McIntosh The Woman
Sean Bridgers Chris Cleek
Angela Bettis Belle Cleek
Lauren Ashley Carter Peggy Cleek
Carlee Baker Miss Genevieve Raton
Zach Rand Brian Cleek
Shyla Molhusen Darlin' Cleek
Alexa Marcigliano Socket

CREW

Directed by **Lucky McKee**
Written by **Jack Ketchum** and **Lucky McKee** based on their novel
Produced by **Robert Tonino** and **Andrew van den Houten**
Director of Photography **Alex Vendler**
Editor **Zach Passero**
Music by **Sean Spillane**
Production Designer **Krista Gall**
Sound Design by **Andrew Smetek**
Special Make-up Effects **Robert Kurtzman**
"The Woman" Make-up Design by **Anthony Pepe**



SO YOU THINK YOU KNOW JACK?

by Kevin Kovelant

Sometimes, a book can change your life.

In 1999, at World Horror Con in Atlanta, Georgia, a friend, the author James A. Moore, handed me a copy of *The Girl Next Door* (1989) by some guy named Jack Ketchum and told me I *needed* to read it. It's entirely possible he may have even demanded it. I'd never heard of Jack Ketchum, but Stephen King had called him "the scariest man in America." I trusted James, and that blurb is high praise from someone who has a pretty reasonable understanding of "scary." Plus, he was also a guest at the convention, and I didn't want to be rude. So, I gave it a go.

I couldn't put it down.

In fact, I read the whole thing pretty much in one sitting.

The next morning, I had him sign the book for me.

"I have a feeling that your books and I are going to get along very well," I told him. He laughed.

A few months later, I found out he was looking for a new webmaster. I volunteered.

We worked together for the next 18 years.

The "standard" biography of Jack Ketchum, one that has appeared in various iterations in his books, is that "Jack Ketchum is the pseudonym for a former actor, singer, teacher, literary agent, lumber salesman and soda jerk – a former flower child and baby boomer who figures that in 1956, Elvis, dinosaurs, and horror probably saved his life."

Of all these former professions, "literary agent" is perhaps one of the most important.

Dallas Mayr (Jack Ketchum's real name) was a literary agent during the 1970s in New York City while doing his own writing – submitting stories to various men's magazines (think

Swank and *Nugget*, among others), writing record reviews for *Creem*, and even having a piece published in *Miniature Collector*, a magazine devoted to doll houses and such. A fan of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), he felt that horror fiction needed a jolt. Taking things into his own hands, he wrote a novel called *Off Season* (1980) about cannibals terrorizing the small town of Dead River, Maine. He'd originally submitted the manuscript through the agency he was working for, using the pseudonym "Jack Ketchum" to hide his identity. Once the agency decided the manuscript was worth pitching, he came clean. Ballantine Books was interested but may have – ahem – bitten off more than they could chew.

Off Season was unlike anything the editors at Ballantine had ever seen. They were excited. They promised a massive print run and aggressive promotion. He was going to be the next Stephen King. But there were a few issues. Some of the content was a bit "over the top." Things like recipes for "man meat jerky" needed to go. Dallas submitted a heavily revised manuscript, but there were still a number of things that made the publisher nervous.

More edits ensued.

Finally, there was a version that Ballantine felt comfortable publishing.

Until they weren't.

A change in management led to a change in taste. The massive promotional blitz was suddenly canceled, and the original cover was deemed too graphic. ("Advance Reader Copies" with the original cover fetch a nice amount on eBay, and truthfully, the cover is rather tame.) In something akin to the publishing equivalent of *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), the book was released with an all-black cover. With the title in a black font. And a single red blood drip.

It wasn't until 1999 that an "Unexpurgated Edition" of *Off Season* came out, based on the second version he submitted. Dallas had tossed the original version in the garbage, and this was a source of deep regret for him. (I quote: "Yeah, yeah, I know. You don't have to tell me. I'm an asshole. What can I say?") All subsequent editions of *Off Season* have used the "Unexpurgated Edition" as their source.

Even neutered as it was, the original publication of *Off Season* put Jack Ketchum on the map with the readers who mattered. It gained a cult following over the years and sold respectably enough. People often speak of a 'Dead River trilogy' or 'series,' but often fail to realize that the second Jack Ketchum novel, *Hide and Seek* (1984), was also set there.

Perhaps the intention was to have a Ketchum version of Derry, Maine, or Castle Rock. The cannibals wouldn't return, however, until later.

Originally, *Off Season* was going to be a standalone. In an article-turned-afterword for the limited edition of *Offspring* (1991) from Overlook Connection Press, Dallas mentions that he's not fond of sequels. He prefers to move on. He changed his mind, however, when he realized that most of his books were being marketed as "by the author of *Off Season*," even though it was no longer in print. *Offspring* was an attempt to not only gain further recognition, but to potentially nudge *Off Season* back into print. *Offspring* wasn't purely mercenary, though. Far from it. Dallas had a story that he liked.

Offspring takes place on what could best be described as the worst possible night anyone could ever have. Amy and David Halbard play host to their friend Claire for the weekend. Claire arrives with her baby and her abusive husband, Steven, is close behind. Steven, though hell bent on revenge, turns out to be the least of their worries. One of the cannibals from *Off Season* has survived and, over the years, gradually rebuilt her clan. The clan has been moving up and down the coast, into Canada and finally back down to Dead River. They're hungry. And it's a perfect night to feed.

The film version of *Offspring* was directed by Andrew van den Houten and released in 2009. Andrew had served as a producer on the film adaptation of Jack Ketchum's *The Girl Next Door* (2007) and would later produce *The Woman* (2011) and *Darlin'* (2019). Prior to 2009, horror cinema had gone through a phase (whether good or bad is still debated), where gore and violence came to the forefront. Films like *Saw* (2004), *Hostel* (2005), *Martyrs* (2008) and others (often derisively called 'torture porn,' though I would argue that they have artistic merit) pushed the envelope with how far they were willing to go with what was shown on screen. *Offspring*, in many ways, benefits from the precedents set by these films. It's one thing to read some of these scenes on the page, in a book, but film adaptations tend to flinch when it comes to extremity. Not so, in this case. Van den Houten's use of blood and gore is reminiscent of Deodato and Lenzi's 1980s cannibal films, but all the more disturbing because the film *doesn't* take place in a 'remote' jungle. The cannibals *aren't* an uncontacted tribe. These cannibals are mostly kids. They're here, and not far from your back yard. In fact, if they're not in your back yard, it's because they're already in your house. Body parts aren't strewn in the trees. They're nonchalantly tossed around the kitchen and carried off with as little thought as you or I bringing in the groceries from the car.

Things to watch for in *Offspring*: Pollyanna McIntosh, who plays the character of the Woman, and reprises the role in the eponymous sequel, is especially fun to watch ("*Bahbee...*"). She is now in the cast of *The Walking Dead* (2010-present), but this will forever be my



favorite role of hers. Her final scene with Steven is a treat. The medical examiner, Max? That's Jack Ketchum! The character of 'The Cow' – he's not just a babbling hostage who's lost his mind. He's very important to the survival of the clan. Very important. He's called The Cow for a reason.

Filmmaker (and author) Lucky McKee was taken with Pollyanna's performance, and wanted to feature the character in her own film. Together, he and Dallas wrote both the screenplay and novel *The Woman* (both 2011). They would later collaborate on the novella *I'm Not Sam* (2012), and what would be the final novel with Jack Ketchum's name on it, *The Secret Life of Souls* (2016). With Lucky directing, and Pollyanna back as the title character, the film opens shortly after the end of *Offspring*. If the 'civilized' folks were having a rough night in *Offspring*, the Woman was about to have a rough day of things.

We are introduced to the Cleek family. Chris, the father; his wife Belle; their son Brian; and their daughters Peggy and Darlin'. There's something... *off*... about the family dynamic. Chris is kind of skeezy. Brian, maybe even more so. There's nothing overt. But there's something not quite right. Peggy seems to have some issues. She's definitely dealing with something, but what? It might appear that maybe her father pays a little *too* much attention to her. Brian seems to emulate his father, but maybe Chris isn't someone who should be emulated. Underneath their carefully cultivated façade, something's up with the Cleek family. And it's about to get weirder.

One morning, while Chris is out hunting, he's startled to see a woman bathing in the stream. The Woman, in fact. And, to be honest, he's turned on. If he has a bit of a 'predator' vibe to him, he's about to meet a real predator. Chris returns home, and has his family clean out their cellar. He has a surprise for them.

He captures the Woman, knocks her out, brings her home, and chains her up in the cellar. She's the new "family project" – they will "civilize" her, with all that entails (and, well, maybe more). The rest of the Cleek family is a bit baffled, but they also know better than to refuse. If Chris wants something, it's better that he gets it. What ensues can variously be described as a battle of wits, a battle of man vs. nature, or a battle of the sexes. You know who's ultimately going to win, but *how it gets to that point* is full of twists and turns, heartbreaking revelations, pitch black humor, and brutal violence.

When *The Woman* first screened at the Sundance Film Festival in 2011, an audience member (a *male* audience member) took considerable offense at the film, screaming:

"This movie degrades women! This movie degrades men! You are sick! This is not art! You are SICK! This is a disgusting movie! Sundance should be ashamed! How *dare* you show this?! I would like every person in this audience to get up and come with me so we don't have to listen to this sick mind!!"

He wound up being escorted from the theater.

Dallas and Lucky both felt that they couldn't have asked for better publicity.

Other people have found the film to be rather *feminist*, in scope. Personally, I believe that such things are in the eye of the beholder. But then again, I think a similar case could be made for the original *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *Thriller: A Cruel Picture* (1973).

Things to watch for in *The Woman*: Pollyanna McIntosh, of course, is stunning in the title role. What's up with the dogs? Why is everyone so reluctant to feed them? You will (probably) learn a new word – 'anophthalmia.' Best use of a lawnmower blade since Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (aka *Dead Alive* [1992]). Probably not a spoiler, but Darlin' Cleek survives the film (beautifully, I might add), and her story (and the Woman's) continues on in the film *Darlin'*, directed by Pollyanna McIntosh, and produced with the blessings of both Dallas and Lucky (watch for a cameo by Andrew van den Houten as 'Photo Journalist Charlie'). Dallas visited the set shortly before he passed away and loved what he saw.

The 'Dead River' books seem to be favorites among Jack Ketchum fans. The obvious question is: "Why is there no film of *Off Season*?" The book was optioned, and remains, unfortunately, unproduced. Dallas was proud of these films – of all of his film adaptations, and the respect that filmmakers gave him to be involved in the filmmaking process is all too rare.

In addition to calling Jack Ketchum "the scariest man in America," Stephen King also observed that "Disney Pictures will never make a movie out of a Jack Ketchum novel."

Thankfully, others have.

Kevin Kovelant has been the webmaster of jackketchum.net for 20 years, and has appeared as a character in two of Jack Ketchum's stories. He currently convinces people that they need (more) wine in their lives, and lives in California with his wife, Amanda, and their son, Tesla. He misses Dallas Mayr every day.





GET LUCKY

by Michael Blyth

The Sundance Film Festival has a rich history of breaking unknown horror films onto the international scene. Genre sensations such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Saw* (2004), or more recently *Get Out* (2017) and *Hereditary* (2018), went, almost overnight, from relative obscurity to being the most talked about fright flicks in town following their successful debuts at the annual celebration of indie filmmaking. In amongst this roll call of big-hitters stands a creepy little outcast: *May* (2002). While Lucky McKee's acclaimed hit might not have gone on to break the box office in quite the same way as some of its contemporaries, it immediately secured a spot in the hearts of discerning horror fans and almost two decades on, remains one of the most darkly unnerving and downright heart-breaking horror films to have ever appeared in Sundance's influential Midnight Madness line-up.

While often assumed to be McKee's debut, *May* was in fact his second feature, having teamed up with USC college pal Chris Sivertson the previous year for their low-budget, shot-on-video teen horror romp *All Cheerleaders Die*, about an undead pep squad taking revenge on their jock boyfriends. This little seen post-grad novelty (which McKee and Sivertson would themselves remake in 2013) laid the foundations for many of the obsessions McKee has continued to explore throughout his career – namely kick-ass girls with a side order of the macabre. But when it comes to discussing McKee's work in earnest, his much-loved sophomore hit is really the place to start.

May tells the sad and strange story of a lonely young woman looking for a friend. Ditching the schlocky scares of *All Cheerleaders Die* in favor of a creeping, melancholic menace, McKee's follow up was concerned with the horror of isolation and the fear of being different. In her own sweet way, May Canady is the ill-fated love child of Frankenstein's monster and Carrie White – an empathetic 'villain' not to fear, but to fear for.

At its core, *May* is a deeply compassionate piece of work (and a blackly humorous one too) – not just because of McKee's obvious affinity and affection for his misfit heroine, but thanks to Angela Bettis's revelatory lead performance. With a palpable sense of psychosis simmering just below the surface, Bettis exudes a curious fragility, navigating the fine line between childlike fascination and dangerous obsession with extraordinary nuance. It



really is one of the great horror performances, up there with Sissy Spacek in De Palma's similarly sympathetic adaptation of Stephen King's telekinetic teen bestseller. As such, it is no surprise that in the same year *May* was released, Bettis was cast as 16-year-old scapegoat Carrie in a TV adaptation, despite the fact that the actress was nearing her 30s at the time of filming.

Following its Sundance premiere, *May* received (rightfully) glowing reviews – particularly in the horror press who were unsurprisingly receptive to its oddball charms – and secured a limited theatrical run in the States (though sadly no theatrical release in the UK). But while the future looked bright for the young filmmaker, he was about to experience the first of a few setbacks he would regrettably endure over the years that followed.

For those lucky filmgoers who had fallen under *May's* curious spell, McKee's follow up was hotly anticipated. The film he returned with in 2006, *The Woods*, was a wonderful slice of girls' school gothic, drenched in atmosphere and rich foreboding, which once again placed the emotional journey of a tormented young woman at its center. But while the film is certainly an interesting one, thoroughly deserving of your time, in a cruel turn of events, *The Woods* languished in post-production hell, seemingly lost in the shuffle during the 2004 Sony/MGM merger. It even looked for a while like the film would never see the light of day, its planned theatrical release date put on hold indefinitely. By the time it did finally emerge around a year after the original release plans, MGM had apparently lost all interest in their spooky little orphan, bypassing theaters altogether. A sad fate for a film which really did deserve so much more.

Around the same time that *The Woods* was languishing in release limbo, McKee was approached by Mick Garris to contribute a segment for his upcoming TV anthology series, *Masters of Horror* (2005-2007), following George Romero's unexpected departure from the project. McKee, a fledgling filmmaker with just one official release under his belt, was perhaps a bold choice for a so-called 'master', appearing alongside genre royalty such as Dario Argento, Joe Dante, John Carpenter and Tobe Hooper, each of whom were also commissioned to direct standalone episodes. Still, it was an encouraging sign that the industry was taking notice of the newcomer's considerable talents, and the resulting episode, 'Sick Girl', a delightfully eccentric tale about a shy entomologist (played by Angela Bettis), her new girlfriend, and the oversized mantis which unbeknownst to them shares their bed, is perhaps the most original and distinctive instalment of the whole enterprise, arguably more indebted to screwball romantic comedy than classic horror.

Unfortunately for McKee, the difficulties he faced with *The Woods* were just a taste of what was to follow with his next feature length project, *Red* (2008), which stands as Lucky's

unluckiest break. McKee had worked for years on this adaptation of his favorite pulp horror novelist Jack Ketchum's book of the same name, in which an old man seeks justice after the sons of a wealthy businessman kill his beloved dog. But as filming got underway, disturbing on-set reports indicated a less than harmonious production, and halfway through shooting it was announced that McKee had been removed from the project, eventually replaced as director with Trygve Allister Diesen. Discussing the events of the time, McKee himself said:

I developed the thing for several years and put it all together and directed half of it and got removed from the production. We disagreed on the proper way to make the film. It was just the wrong combination of people. It was unfortunate for all of us involved in the project. If I hadn't had that experience – I really thought *Red* was going to be a big film for me. The timing was good on it. I had a great cast and all that stuff. To have that taken away from me, it really put me in a situation where I was like, "I don't know if I really want to direct films anymore."

Fortunately for us, a couple of years later, McKee did resume his position in the director's chair, albeit a little bit battered and bruised. In a particularly bold move of defiance, he teamed up with Ketchum once again to write *The Woman* (2011), the horrific tale of an unhinged family man who captures and tortures a feral woman in a disturbed effort to "civilize" her. The resulting film is an incendiary one, no question, but as one would come to expect from McKee, it is a bitingly intelligent and subtly nuanced piece of work too, even during its most extreme and confrontational moments, of which there are many. However, while the film was branded a modern classic by some following its Sundance debut in 2011, it was condemned as 'torture porn' by others. The extent to which the film upset its detractors could be witnessed in a viral video of a particularly distressed patron viewer storming out of the Sundance screening, aggressively claiming: "This is not art, this is bullshit. This is degradation of women in an absolute way... This film ought to be confiscated, burned – there's no value in showing this to anyone."

When questioned about his objectives with the film, and the subsequent reaction it provoked amongst audiences, McKee responded by saying: "I was really nervous about people misinterpreting my intention. I knew I hadn't done anything wrong. It's strange to make a film and have somebody say out loud that you had done something wrong by making it. I put a lot of care into that movie. It's not just a cheap piece of exploitation. There's a lot of thought behind every single shot and every single moment in the film." With these words, McKee deftly articulated what it is that makes him so special as a filmmaker working within the horror genre – a sense of responsibility. There is nothing thoughtless or mindlessly sadistic about *The Woman*; it is a carefully considered critique, and condemnation, of patriarchal abuse. This is not violence for violence's sake, in the way



that the *Saw* films, or Eli Roth's 2005 film *Hostel* (and its crudely reprehensible sequel) arguably are. This is horror with a social conscience. But, of course, it is controversy which grabs headlines, and *The Woman's* reputation as a scandalous piece of exploitation cinema proved hard to shake, and years later it remains one of the most frequently misunderstood horror films of the last decade.

It is perhaps no surprise that, following the storm of controversies, McKee retreated into the safety of familiar territory for his next project, reuniting with former co-director Chris Sivertson to bring the aforementioned new version of their college horror opus *All Cheerleaders Die* to the screen in 2013. The results are the polar opposite of *The Woman* – self-consciously trashy, silly and a whole lot of fun. But even at his most frivolous, McKee still present us with horror heroines the likes of which are rarely seen in male-directed genre cinema. These are women with agency, women who think and act for themselves. Men are superfluous here, ridiculous even, a theme which we have seen all throughout McKee's work.

McKee's next film (save for a short entry in the 2015 anthology film *Tales of Halloween*) proved something of a surprise move for a filmmaker who had thus far worked almost exclusively within the horror genre. *Blood Money* (2017) saw McKee venture into action thriller territory, telling the tale of an amoral criminal (played by John Cusack) out to get his hands on four bags of stolen cash. Written by Jared Butler and Lars Norberg, this low budget riff on John Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) and Sam Raimi's *A Simple Plan* (1998) was efficient enough, but lacked that certain Lucky charm, that care and sensitivity we had come to expect from the ever-thoughtful filmmaker. For the first time in his idiosyncratic career, McKee felt like a director for hire.

But thankfully McKee's departure from his beloved genre proved fleeting. 2019 saw McKee working again with screenwriter Chris Sivertson for *Kindred Spirits*, a deliciously enjoyable female-focused psychodrama in which a single mother and her teenage daughter find their peaceful lives disturbed by the mysterious return of an absent family member. Paying tribute to a rich history of domestic thrillers from Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) to *Single White Female* (1992), the film is at once playful yet quietly menacing, whilst always grounded with a quiet, but unavoidable, sense of sadness. And as with *May* or *The Woman*, it is that sense of sadness that continues to make McKee's work so powerful and so human. Horror films are built to scare, to upset, to provoke, but when they also possess the power to move you, as McKee's films so often do, that is something truly special.

Michael Blyth is a film programmer for the BFI London Film Festival and BFI Flare: London LGBTIQ+ Film Festival. He is the author of *Devil's Advocates: In the Mouth of Madness* for Auteur Publishing.





CYCLES OF ABUSE: THE WOMAN AS FAMILY HORROR FILM

By Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

Lucky McKee's *The Woman* is no exploitation fairy tale. In the United States alone, a 2017 study by the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention revealed almost half of women killed by homicide were murdered by a current partner or an ex. The National Domestic Violence Hotline states that more than 12 million men and women a year are victims of physical or emotional violence at the hands of an intimate partner, be it rape, stalking, or assault. There are more than one million women who were shot by an intimate partner; gun-related intimate partner violence rose 2% from 2010 to 2017, and, on average, three women a day will be killed by their partner.

And then there's the children. According to the World Health Organization, in 2019, 380,250,000 children around the world have witnessed their mothers as the victims of domestic violence. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services website states that "children who witness violence between parents may also be at greater risk of being violent in their future relationships." None of this is particularly new of course; a 1989 report in *The New York Times* noted that "studies also now indicate that about one-third of people who are abused in childhood will become abusers themselves."

Taking this into account, although ostensibly set in a world of cannibal cults and feral savages, the ideological engine that propels Lucky McKee's magnum opus *The Woman* (2011) is one based very much on the real horror story faced every single day by millions of women and children around the world who live under the rule of abusive, violent, sadistic men. Its horror stems precisely from just how ordinary so many aspects of it are, a ubiquity the above statistics demonstrate all too readily.

Looking back at the pearl-clutching that surrounded the film upon its original release and considering how unflinchingly the movie is centered around the reality of domestic violence, accusations of the film itself being misogynistic would be almost funny if they

weren't so disingenuously off the mark; *The Woman* is about misogyny, and this is a very different thing. Far from the outrageous fantasy we often seek in exploitation film, *The Woman* at times verges on documentary realism; far from mining the horror of family violence for empty thrills, it instead brings into public view that which remains, for far too many, hidden in the home.

As Tony Williams wrote in the updated edition of his foundational 1996 book *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, the family horror movie is "a warning bell" that reflects "the wider world outside." He continues, "it maintains its role as a symbolic alarm bell of our era's internal and external problems." It is precisely this that allows us to locate *The Woman* as a powerful instance of the domestic horror film, because like *Psycho* (1960) and *The Amityville Horror* (1979) long before it, it identifies the family home as a site of almost unimaginable violence, in ways that are sometimes explicit, and sometimes deeply repressed, hidden from view.

The violence that takes place in the film – mostly inflicted by the psychotic patriarch Chris Cleek (Sean Bridgers) on immediate family members themselves – *always* takes place on the family's property. This is no accident. While we see traces of his misogyny bleed into the real world, it is at home – his kingdom – where he feels fully at liberty to extend the force of his violent, masculine control. We know from the outset the significance of this location and its connection to Chris's sense of power simply because it is where he brings the nameless Woman herself (Pollyanna McIntosh); he does not, it is worth pointing out, torture her endlessly in the woods, but rather in what he considers the 'safety' of his own home. For Chris, the domestic sphere is where his power reigns supreme, where his authority is the strongest, and where his hatred for women can be unleashed in full force. For the bulk of the film, he retains his position as the dominant power, a role defined specifically through his obsession with his own masculinity and a misogyny that he spells out in no uncertain terms at the film's climax.

But let's go back, starting with the film's name. Its universality is fundamental to the horrors that lie hidden in the Cleek household; *The Woman* refers both to this woman, but her lack of a specific name grants her the ability to represent much more than just one single individual. As has been widely noted, *The Woman* was adapted from award-winning horror writer Jack Ketchum's 2010 novel of the same name, co-written by McKee, and a sequel to Ketchum's previous novels *Off Season* (1980) and *Offspring* (1991), the latter of which was adapted to the screen in 2009 by Andrew van den Houten.

While *The Woman* certainly adheres to the broader narrative arc of this series, it also stands confidently as a self-contained work, a parable of the broader climate of domestic violence – and violence against women more generally – that has now grown in so many countries to virtually epidemic proportions. Stepping away from Ketchum's rich wider narrative universe, then, the Woman is notable for her very anonymity. She is simultaneously both

no woman and every woman, a symbolic figure captured in the middle of an all-too-real scenario of everyday domestic violence, everyday abuse, everyday incest. The power of *The Woman* is that it reminds us of the true, deep horror at the core of this everydayness.

While an orthodox reliance on plot and dialogue may not bring this to the surface, watching how McKee has formally constructed the film makes this duality of women – and the potential risk factor that gender difference has been statistically proven to play in domestic, family and intimate partner violence – a compelling stylistic drumbeat throughout the film. In what might at first be dismissed as an artistic flourish, McKee's ubiquitous use of reflections, slow motions and doubling techniques, where images of women blur and morph in a variety of ways, provides a subtly poetic connection to so many of the elements at the heart of this story. There is a constant indication through the very mechanics of the film's style that this Woman is one of *many* Women; not just Peg (Lauren Ashley Carter), Darlin' (Shyla Molhusen), Belle (Angela Bettis), Socket (Alexa Marcigliano) or Ms. Raton (Carlee Baker), but women just like them who fall prey to men who can only define their own sense of masculinity through violent dominance over women.

Just as these doubles and reflections multiply and reproduce the images of women shown on screen on a symbolic level, so too a number of the film's shocking acts of violence are implicitly suggested to be reproduced from the horrific real-world phenomenon of domestic violence itself. The off-screen rape of Peg by her father, the knocking unconscious of Belle by her husband, etc. are not over-imaginative whims of horror storytelling, but everyday phenomena, secrets that lie hidden within the walls of far too many family homes. There's consequently a sort of ad nauseam *mise-en-abyme* at work here through these visual effects; McKee shows us reflections-of-reflections-of-reflections of violence against women until the edges get so fuzzy that the tiny acts merge into one giant, seemingly endless nightmare. This nightmare is not contained to the fictional world of the cinematic space; it's on social media, on the radio, on the front pages of the newspapers we try to turn away from in supermarket queues, in the stories women share amongst ourselves of our pasts, and, if we're brave enough, our presents. *The Woman* is a smeared glimpse into an infinitely reflecting abyss of horror, crystallizing around the phenomenon that male-dominated historical memory has fought for centuries to deny: the savage fury that lies at the heart of the unnamed, dehumanized Woman.

By manipulating screen time through slow motion, McKee creates a sense not so much of timelessness, but of *out-of-time-ness*; there's something unspoken about the Woman's ferality that harks not to primitiveness as such, but rather to something almost trans-historical, that exists beyond the norms of time itself. She is a time-traveler, a witness, a warrior and a survivor. That this renders her monstrous and dehumanizes her is, perhaps, exactly the point: at what stage do these stories of violence against women become ubiquitous enough that a blanket rejection of so-called 'civility' is the only logical outcome? That grabbing abused children and walking away into the forest, away from the system



that has failed them, is seen as anything but a reasonable choice to take? Considering Chris's declaration at the start of the film that he seeks to "civilize" the Woman, McIntosh's performance reveals the dark, visceral horror that lies dormant but ever-present in socially acceptable tales of 'faulty' femininity transformed, from George Bernard Shaw's 1913 play *Pygmalion*, from *Educating Rita* (1983) to *Pretty Woman* (1990).

In *The Woman*, the hypocrisy of this 'civilizing' project is revealed for its true ugliness and hypocrisy. There is a compelling tension in the film between the almost pedestrian, everyday horrors that occur within the family home, and the more extreme violence that takes place in the outer building where Socket lives with the family dogs and the Woman is strung up, Christ-like, in the cellar. But as the film progresses, the distinctions between these two spaces increasingly collapses; the violence we see against women *all* stems from the same core, whether it is against family members in the domesticated space of the family home itself (incest, wife-beating) or against strangers tied up, raped, beaten and abused in the outer buildings.

That core is, of course, Chris. His role as father is one he embraces, and the most chilling part of his behavior is how seamlessly he unites his performance as successful family man with the monstrosity that drives his identity as a successful man on a fundamental level. They are, for him, one and the same, and it is on this level that his informal training of his young son Brian (Zach Rand) makes explicit not just the manner in which the cycle of abuse is passed down across generations, but the fact that young men *learn* how to treat women. A monster who rips the Woman's nipples off with pliers, Brian is, according to how Chris has trained him, simply doing what he has been taught to do. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Chris tells Brian the morning after his son has witnessed him rape the Woman before the young man embarks on his own chilling assault. Accordingly, like a 'good boy', Brian takes his advice.

While it is hard to feel empathy for sexual abuser Brian, that he is reduced to Chris's 'good boy' who performs his 'tricks' well also animalizes him, thus falling on the same spectrum of dehumanization that dominates Chris's vision of women. That both Chris and Brian refer to women as "bitches" is revealed to be far more than just a random adoption of vernacular, with the horrific revelation of animalized girl-dog Socket rendering this literal. 'Good boy' Brian is the opposite of a 'bitch', but still an animal at the mercy of its owner; he thrives to learn his lessons well on his journey from obedient puppy-in-training to becoming an attack dog. He seeks not just follow his father's orders without question, but adapting to the broader misogyny that drives Chris's actions and building them into his own identity, both at home and, in ways increasing in aggression, in the public sphere.

The Woman is thus not merely about the processes of dehumanization that drive misogynist violence, but about how naturalized these attitudes can become, passed down from generation to generation. It is a film about the normalization of misogyny, and about how

acts of gendered violence – from placing different expectations on boys and girls, to harsh words, to a slap, to rape, to long term imprisonment and sustained torture – are all points on the same spectrum. They are fundamentally interlinked; it is therefore no leap to move from the 'everyday' violence of the family home to the 'fantastic' violence that occurs in the barn and cellar nearby. That Chris is a lawyer might be the most prescient aspect of his character; he is, quite literally, a representative of social norms and his job is to maintain those standards. That his actions fly so shockingly in the face of basic human morality contains a chilling sting in the tail; he is not just protected by the law, but he *is* the law. As all who live under his roof learn, his authority is absolute.

Well, almost. It is hard to deny a cathartic thrill in the climactic bloodbath at the end of the film, as complicated as it is by the fascinating decision of the Woman's first victim on her path of vengeance to be Belle herself. As an enabler, traitor, and victim herself, what *The Woman* understands is that Belle has been programmed to support the system that has so demeaned her and her children, and that renders her the enemy, too. While the film's final moments offer a less-than-orthodox rallying of women who choose to move beyond the system which has oppressed them, there is a powerful logic to it that elegantly reveals there is nowhere within the system as it currently stands for these women to find not just empowerment but a basic right to safety. That lies only in the community that they now will begin to build together.

It seems fitting, then, that *The Woman* has recently been followed up by the 2019 sequel *Darlin'*, directed and written by McIntosh herself who again appears as the unnamed Woman. As the title suggests, it follows the now grown-up Darlin' (Lauryn Canny) and her own encounters with systems that oppress women – this time the Catholic Church – indicating that the strands of gendered violence and the abuses of power revealed in *The Woman* can take many forms. Directed as it is by a woman – to call that an anomaly in horror is an understatement – the fact that these stories can be told by creative voices so long excluded from the very modes of film production itself adds even further depth and value to McIntosh's role, and her centrality in this challenging, important and socially urgent narrative universe.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is a film critic and author from Melbourne, Australia, who has published five books on cult cinema with a focus on gender politics.

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Woman was restored in 4K by Moderncine. The film is presented in its original 1.78:1 aspect ratio with its original 5.1 surround sound mix.

The original digital intermediate was remastered in 4K resolution by the film's editor and post-production supervisor Zach Passero. The film was restored and graded in SDR and HDR at Cheeky Monkey Post. All restoration work was supervised and approved by director Lucky McKee.

ZP Studios: **Zach Passero**

Cheeky Monkey Post: **Ryan Martinez**

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Flower**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
Disc Production Manager **Nora Mehenni**
QC **Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Blu-ray Mastering **Fidelity In Motion / The Engine House Media Services**
Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Artwork **Vanessa McKee**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Michael Blyth, Lauren Ashley Carter, Kimberly Estrada, Alexandra Heller Nicholas, Kevin Kovelant, Matt McClain, Lucky McKee, Vanessa McKee, Zach Passero, Ian Rattray, Erik Rosenbluh, Pete Tomkies, Andrew van den Houten



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