

## "Hide & Seek" Can't Bear Its Cheap Twist: Also, "Boogeyman" and "Alone in the Dark"

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 07 February 2005 18:00

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### **HIDE & SEEK**

(Warning: Potential spoilers – for both *Hide & Seek* and *Million Dollar Baby* – ahead. Proceed with caution.) If you haven't yet seen Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby*

, it might be too late to do so without prejudice, since numerous critics, pundits, and op-ed writers have probably already ruined the film for you.

Not four days after its national release on January 28, conservative writers came out of the woodwork to decry the movie's final reels, which, depending on whom you read, are irresponsible, immoral, and potentially sacrilegious. But whatever you might think of the morality behind *Million Dollar Baby's* denouement, it would be hard to argue that Eastwood and company don't give the material due respect. You might not agree with the decisions made by the film's characters (many columnists – the ones all too happy to give away the film's outcome – obviously don't), but their actions, given the context, certainly make narrative sense; Eastwood and screenwriter Paul Haggis have fashioned their material so expertly that the choices the characters are forced to make in the final reels are the only ones they *would* make. Again, feel free to agree or disagree with *Baby*

's ethical stance, but at least the subject matter has been thought out with intelligence and care.

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It's doubtful that *Hide & Seek* will generate anything like the controversy surrounding *Million Dollar Baby*

; what's the point in getting in a dither over a cheesy little scare flick that'll vanish within a few weeks? Yet when the "surprise" revelation was finally unveiled in John Polson's thriller, I was left with the queasy feeling that the director either had no idea how volatile his material actually was, or couldn't fathom how to handle the larger questions it raises.

*Hide & Seek*

gooses its audience with a Big Twist, yet the twist is an uncomfortable, appalling one, and in more competent hands it might have made for a disturbing, psychologically devastating work. Here, however, the final-reel explanation is employed as nothing but a crude effect – the *de rigueur*

"Gotcha!" moment – and its borders on the offensive.

*Hide & Seek*

leaves you feeling sad and vaguely dirty, its overtones so unpleasant that they override the film's technical competency and contributions of the actors, and the movie gets more frustrating the more you think about it.

Amazingly, only one person involved with *Hide & Seek* seems to recognize and play the movie's subtext, and she's all of 10 years old. (And a little child shall lead them, indeed.) Dakota Fanning, sporting a brunette 'do, plays Emily, a happy little girl whose mother (an intense, sad-eyed Amy Irving) slits her wrists in the family bathtub one night; Robert De Niro is Emily's dad, a distressingly slow-on-the-uptake psychologist who takes his daughter to a country house to heal their psychological wounds. Their post-trauma awkwardness, though, is soon alleviated by the "appearance" of Emily's imaginary friend Charlie, who gets the girl giggling, doesn't seem to like Dad too much, and has the habit of murdering friends – and, of course, the cherished family pet – that stand between him and his young pal. For most of the film's length, it's

*Harvey*

-meets-

*The Bad Seed*

time, and even though the plotting and dialogue and shock effects are more stupid than spooky, the cast – which includes Famke Janssen, Elisabeth Shue, Dylan Baker, and Melissa Leo – seems game for goofball horror fun, and Ms. Fanning is really quite something. Those guiding her career might have a knack for choosing for her some of the absolute worst scripts Hollywood has to offer – could any other performer survive the likes of

*I Am Sam*

,  
*Uptown Girls*

,  
*The Cat in the Hat*

, and  
*Man on Fire*

? – but Fanning's professionalism under duress is inspiring, and, performance-wise, she mops

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the floor with De Niro, whose dyspeptic mopey-ness is indistinguishable from constipation.

Yet the mystery behind who or what Charlie is must eventually be uncovered, and when the revelation does come, it opens a whole new can of worms that the film doesn't begin to know how to deal with. There are creepy intimations of child abuse all throughout Palson's movie – How, exactly, are we to read the relationship between Emily and the imaginary Charlie, an adult "friend" who swears Emily to secrecy about the horrific acts he commits, and who threatens her loved ones with death if she reveals his identity? – and these dark tones are made manifest during *Hide & Seek's* final reels, along with nagging suggestions of possible incest. The script and direction aren't nearly strong enough to support such weighty themes;

*Hide & Seek*

might come across as just another vapid Hollywood thriller, but its true impulses are too ugly to leave audiences feeling anything but dissatisfied and miserable. Dakota Fanning, bless her heart, might be playing her role for all the reality it can bear, but everyone else involved with *Hide & Seek*

appears blind to what's actually going on in the film, which is far more ethically irresponsible than anything you'll find in

*Million Dollar Baby*

.



**BOOGEYMAN**

If *Boogeyman* has any precedent, it's probably *Darkness Falls*, the unforgettable scare flick that finally revealed, for all the world to see, the murderous impulses of The Tooth Fairy. (That bitch.) And while it would be nice to say that this new endeavor will enter the annals of trash classics along with that 2003 work, it's too sincere to be any kind of disreputable good time. Really, what are the actors doing treating this material *seriously*

? Having said that, the earnestness of the leading performers is rather impressive: Barry Watson, as the traumatized young man who watched *The Thing in His Closet* eat his dad, has a haunted melancholy that's surprisingly touching, and Emily Deschanel shares her sister Zooey's quirky normalcy; not that it's any big accomplishment, but they completely outclass their material. Most of

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### *Boogeyman*

is uninspired, with decibel-busting sound effects taking the place of actual scares, but I must admit to being slightly jazzed by the time-and-space contortions that take place between the characters' closet doors; although it's barely a recommendation, if you've ever wondered what Pixar's

### *Monsters Inc.*

would look like as a horror flick, your wait is officially over.



### **ALONE IN THE DARK**

I am in no way endorsing public inebriation, especially at the cineplex, but the videogame-inspired monster mishmash *Alone in the Dark* is so spectacularly inept that the mind boggles at the drinking games it might inspire. Here's how it could work: Every time Christian Slater, playing some sort of assassin of the undead, looks like he wants to freakin'

*kill*

his agent, drink. Every time Stephen Dorff postures and barks in a hilarious attempt to come off as a badass, drink. Every time Tara Reid, playing an archeologist (!), slurs like she's already drunk, drink. Every time a character verbalizes something painfully obvious, like "It's a map!" or "It's a key!", drink. (Actually, with Ms. Reid's elocution, the line comes out as "Itsh key!") Every time you fight the urge to say "The videogame had better effects than this!", drink. And every time you're doubled over laughing when you should be on the edge of your seat, drink. I promise you that the eventual hangover will be more fun than

*Alone in the Dark*

.