



The Exorcist

Mark Kermode

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This new edition of Mark Kermode's text documents the deletion and recovery of key scenes that have now been re-integrated into the film to create "The Exorcist: The Version You've Never Seen". There are also interviews with director William Friedkin and writer/producer William Peter Blatty.

The Exorcist Details

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From Reader Review The Exorcist for online ebook

Bryan Cebulski says

A good book about the production history of The Exorcist. Fascinating look at how Blatty and Friedkin's competing visions actually created something much better (if kinda jagged) than either could have made on their own. Disappointingly, lacks much analysis of the narrative though.

Karen says

This is about the scariest movie ever, in my humble opinion. I've never actually watched it all the way through, and just reading Kermode's appreciation of it freaked me out for a few nights.

I didn't find Kermode's reading of this movie as enjoyable as I found Sean French's The Terminator, but that may be because *The Exorcist* isn't a movie as near and dear to my heart. Still, it's always interesting to read about the behind-the-scenes bickering and deal-cutting that gets a movie made, and there's a fair amount of that here. The film is based on the novel of the same name by William Peter Blatty, who based his book in turn on a real (?) exorcism case that took place in 1949.* Blatty, a Catholic, intended his book to bolster faith by demonstrating the reality of the devil and the possibility of salvation through the Church. Hollywood, of course, had other plans. Blatty served as producer, and alternately collaborated and fought with the movie's director, William Friedkin, over the movie's tone and import.

Friedkin seems to have got his way in most of the important senses, especially since he was the one who oversaw the final edits. Blatty's milder, more hopeful (and less dramatic) ending was sliced in favor of a discordant, uncertain, and eerie finale. (*Tubular Bells* haunts the childhood of most of us born in the 70s, I think.) Friedkin also managed to cut the movie down from its original four hours down to the required two, in some cases by cutting out scenes that were essential for narrative flow. The weird "blips" in narrative that resulted (Chris reminding Regan about what the doctor told her...when there is no prior doctor scene) seem to me to give the movie an even spookier air, as if we're not keeping up with things and there's no solid footing to be found.

One interesting note is that I think the movie might actually pass the Bechdel Test, in a weird way. At least there are two major female characters and they don't spend the whole time talking about men...they're busy trying to survive demonic possession. So I guess that's good?

* Note of interest: the case is described in more detail in a book I read just a few weeks ago, Unbelievable: Investigations into Ghosts, Poltergeists, Telepathy, and Other Unseen Phenomena from the Duke Parapsychology Laboratory.

Paul Bryant says

BFI Modern Classics are beautiful little 100 page books. Every home should have several. This one takes us through the creation and making of one of the all time insane gonzo gross-out projectile vomiting head turning right round crucifix masturbating horror movies, and many intriguing facts are uncovered and theories booted about, but the Elephant in the Room is left disturbingly unmolested, to wit:

did Blatty (author of the novel and the screenplay), Friedkin (director) and Mark Kermode (writer of this book) actually believe the movie was representing a supernatural reality?

Because that's what it appears to be doing. Now, Blatty seems to be a true believer - he began writing the original novel based on a 1949 exorcism which had hit the press and he chose that story because he thought the case presented facts which went a long way towards "proving" that the Catholic version of reality was objectively real. But Friedkin and Kermode appear to be entirely embarrassed by that aspect, quite extraordinarily. There's a big debate to be had here, of course, but it does seem like Friedkin was in the position of Leni Riefenstahl filming the Nuremburg Rally whilst claiming not being a Nazi and just wanting to make a good strong documentary (oh yeah?) and Kermode is like a person writing about "Triumph of the Will" entirely from a film perspective and ignoring that it's actually about Hitler. Still, v nice book, contains great stills.

Kevin says

One of the greatest American films of all time gets the deluxe analytical treatment viz Mark Kermode, who has an obvious passion for Friedkin and his art. This, the third edition of the book, was re-published to include depth on the newest cut of the film- "The Version You've Never Seen"; this revision is probably my favorite part of this text, particularly a bonus interview attached to the end which finds Friedkin and Blatty discussing the good and the bad about the new cut.

With this film there was a tremendous clash between literary and filmic intention, which Kermode is careful to examine. By starting with Blatty's source material and working his way up the evolution, he creates a fascinating historical and theoretical look at this classic film.

Mamoon Ahmed says

Mark Kermode has never hidden his love for this film. But it is a brilliant achievement that he has managed to convey his admiration for the film into such a fascinating breakdown/analysis.

Anyone who has seen the film should read this. Anyone who hasn't watched it should read this and then watch the film.

Käte-marie says

Wasn't very scary, but good book

Steve Wiggins says

I'm currently writing a book about demons, and *The Exorcist* plays a larger-than-life role in the perception of said evil beings. Kermode is a film critic and it shows in his masterful treatment of the film in this book. Not gossip or rumor, this is good critical work. And enjoyable to read. I blogged about it as well (Sects and Violence in the Ancient World).

For those who've never seen the film, there's a strange divide. Younger viewers tend to find it laughable, but guys my age—perhaps because we grew up hearing how terrifying it was—found it very scary. But there's more to it than that. Kermode does a good job of showing how the movie was carefully and thoughtfully made. The collaboration of William Friedkin and William Peter Blatty was a fruitful one. The film always leaves me feeling pensive after I watch it. If it's during a period when I believe in demons it'll make me sleep with the lights on. If I'm skeptical at the time it won't frighten so much as make me wonder. Like my post on *Werewolf*, I would maintain that the story is tragic, although with a hopeful ending.

There was a "true story" behind the novel and cinematic adaptation. Kermode doesn't go into this much, beyond noting that Blatty wanted to write a factual account, but was denied access to the records. This led to a fictional, and arguably superior story because it wasn't constrained by the facts of the case.

Horror is often accused of being puerile, and honestly, at times it is. Some horror films, however, transcend this and become works of art. *The Exorcist* is one such film. And I'm not the only one to think so. I've got a film critic here that wholeheartedly agrees.

Michelle Keill says

Like Lieutenant Kinderman, I love movies. I love to discuss - to 'critique', as he says so superbly. 'The Exorcist' is one of my favourite movies - if not my absolute favourite - of all time. And, as seasoned a horror movie buff as I am, I still can't watch it with the lights off. Yes, it scares the crap out of me, and I've seen it - well, let's just say it's a lot. I love all the mystique surrounding the movie and it's various version, and this book delves deeper into that. This is Kermode at his most interesting - when he's talking about films and not himself (see some of his other books to find out what I mean by that). He loves this film, and gives it the reverence it deserves. He talks us through the theatrical version, and explains the changes made in the 'version you're never seen'. Whilst I don't agree with Blatty and Friedkin that the ending shows us that 'good wins' - the loss of Karras could never be, for me, anything other than a huge downer - it is interesting to read the debate and the artistic struggles between the two of them about what the movie's message is, and how to best convey it.

A fabulous book.

PS. I would like someone to explain to me though just why that demon is face is just so damn scary...

Steve Parcell says

I share Mark's love for *The Exorcist* so I absolutely loved this book. Brilliant.

Benjamin Stahl says

At best, an insightful and most readable companion to the *Exorcist* movie in relation to its marvellous source material by William Peter Blatty.

Suzydumeur says

Très intéressant pour découvrir toutes les anecdotes de tournage, et surtout l'opinion de Friedkin sur son propre film qu'il revisionne complètement.

Peter says

Brilliant analysis of The Exorcist movie by an obsessed fan and film critic.

Sascha says

It's not this book's fault that I didn't learn much new information - I just tend to read a lot about this movie. I love that Kermode is more obsessed with it than I am, because that's saying something.

Jon says

Fans of the film should certainly read this. Film and horror people will also benefit from Kermode's contributions. The book largely follows and draws on the history and creation of the film rather than pushing critical & theoretical examination. This is a fair approach, and the criticism and cultural components Kermode does offer are concise and illuminating--good entry points for those perhaps new to the discussion regarding this important film.

I appreciate how Kermode juggles the challenge of reflecting on Blatty's original novel (which I don't find very impressive), the original theatrical release (astonishing) and the eventual extended version (also quite good, but not essential viewing). The tensions between these different texts are fascinating and Kermode offers some decent thoughts about them all, though I do wish he'd gone a touch further, particularly in his analysis of the extended cut. He seems to mostly side with Blatty and Friedkin's justifications for the re-edit, which I find a bit slouchy, where the more dynamic critical perspective of early chapters acquiesces to the creators more than necessary. But overall I think it's still good stuff, competently rendered.

Admittedly, I would have preferred a bit more cultural criticism (to Friedkin's condescending bemusement, I'm sure). And I never felt like Kermode dealt with the shortcomings of Blatty's deep conviction to a singular meaning (a point that kills the book and hampers the re-edit a bit). The brilliance of the film's original form is in the tensions between its creators. As Kermode states, the movie is "at war with itself" (10), which is

absolutely true, and I wish he'd fleshed out that issue more, especially in regards to the re-edit. This internal conflict is what makes Blatty uncomfortable, but it's what I think keeps the movie relevant and resonant with viewers. A dash of additional cultural criticism may have given this just the right balance, offering greater insight into why viewers responded as they did/do. The creators mull over the audience's response, offering Kermode a fine opportunity to shine light on that topic, yet he mostly doesn't; his space is limited.

Where the book excels most is the close readings of the opening sequence in Iraq and Karras' dream. This is where Kermode's attention to cinematic language--through image, sound, and editing--shines brightest. His attention to detail illuminates the density of these sequences and how they relate to the whole narrative and thematic. These two moments, along with his examination of the sequencing of events in the film's first half, are the most compelling arguments against the re-edits, validating Friedkin's early arguments that the message was obvious already and didn't need the redundant additions of Merrin & Karras talking and the closing bit with Kinderman & Dyer. Kermode never quite acknowledges how his own analysis challenges the reinsertion of these moments. It's a minor quibble of mine, not only because I tend to agree with Friedkin's early position and favor the original version, but because this oversight also does Kermode's own critical work (which affirms the film's value and power) a disservice. Such is the way of things sometimes.

Overall, I don't think interested readers will be disappointed in this book. As with the best in the BFI Modern Classics series, Kermode's book delivers a solid reflection on a vital film. It makes good connections, raises fascinating questions, offers quality analysis, and leaves plenty of room for further contribution from others. Nice stuff.

Scott says

Having read the BFI book for *Silence of the Lambs* for a class last semester, I came to this book expecting the same sort of critical insight that I enjoyed from *SoL* version.

However, it's worth noting that this book's critical insight into the movie itself is fairly basic as Kermode chooses to focus on the behind the scenes effects and production of how the movie was made, especially how the director and original writer came to deciding what went into the film. For those of us who have seen both the original and the "Never-Before-Seen" edition, it helps to understand the thought process that went into choosing these scenes, and later editions of this book add a chapter for the purpose of examining the new scenes from the longer cut.

As a fan of *The Exorcist*, I already knew a lot of these behind-the-scenes details, and was really hoping for the deeper critical insight that I had expected. Also, much of the book's details the drama surrounding *The Exorcist*, public reaction, backlash the actors received for appearing in the movie, and, of course, the arguments concerning what scenes made the final cut. However, Kermode's investment in this quickly just turns to over-presenting the melodrama that was Friedkin and Blatty's disagreements about what scenes made the cut. After awhile, any mention of a conflict between the two just led me to the exasperated thought of, "Bitches, please."

Overall, I found this book a fun afternoon read, but I would say that a lot of this information can be found in one of the specials on the movie.
