



Why Do I Worry When Sam Goes to the Video Store?

[Gail Cain](#)

Last night my husband, Sam, went to the video store to get "The Sixth Sense," a favorite of ours. We had agreed that if he couldn't get it, he'd bring home "Rosemary's Baby." We were in the mood for a bit of domestic horror, a movie that can scare your pants off while avoiding decapitation, mutilation, blood, or gore. We wanted that feeling you get when you think you see something out of the corner of your eye late at night, alone in the house. There's a lot of that in "The Sixth Sense" but what makes the movie fascinating is the "Gotcha" at the end. Through the movie Bruce Willis, a therapist (now that's a stretch) tries to help a young boy face his fears. Willis thinks the child is hallucinating, and it's late in the film before he realizes that the boy actually does see ghosts and needs some help figuring out how to cope with his "sixth sense." It's not until the final few minutes that we realize that Willis himself is dead. Early on the boy had told him that dead people don't know they're dead...they see only what they want to see. So while much of the movie is scary, it's also incredibly sad and very cleverly done.



Sixth Sense



Rosemary's Baby

"Rosemary's Baby" has that same "What's wrong with this picture?" feel to it. The apartment building Rosemary and her husband move into (and feel lucky to get) seems a bit creepy, but maybe it just needs a bit of paint and new curtains. The next-door neighbors are well-meaning...or are they? The plot moves fairly quickly from Rosemary's uneasiness to her flat-out horror. But the rest of us are still not sure: was she impregnated by the Devil or is she hallucinating? No one seems to believe her, not even her doctor. In the final scene we see her reaction to her newborn (after realizing the child hadn't died as she had been told). She says, "What have you done to his eyes?" We can picture the infant as clearly as if she had held him up for us to see, and we know for certain he's the Devil's son.

As both "The Sixth Sense" and "Rosemary's Baby" were checked out last night, Sam came home with "Chinese Box," a horror of another kind. "Chinese Box" is two hours of Jeremy Irons longing for one woman (without a facial scar) while tracking another (with a facial scar) through the back streets of Hong Kong. Jeremy's character is dying of leukemia, and the Chinese doctor offers no treatment. Maybe they both hope the end would come quickly and the movie would be over, but no such luck. At some point, Ruben Blades appears. He plays the guitar, hangs out in Irons's apartment, and accompanies him through the back alleys and bars of Hong Kong. Jeremy Irons is a fascinating actor, but not a warm one. It's hard to imagine anyone hanging out with him, especially Ruben Blades.

Another time Sam came home with "Henry Fool," a movie so bad that remembering it makes me feel slightly nauseated. Parker Posey, an actress I admire tremendously, held my interest for about twenty minutes. After that, it was like witnessing news footage of a natural disaster or an airplane crash: you don't want to watch but you just can't tear yourself away. Part of the problem is the plot: it's awfully hard to make a movie about writers. And this one has two writers: a seductive but terrifically bad one and a sad-sack good one. Unfortunately, they look about the same hunched over a typewriter.

"Henry Fool" has no characters a viewer can identify with. Parker Posey's brother (the sad-sack writer), bullied at work and at home, remains so blank, it is hard to feel sympathy. Though the actor who plays him, James Urbaniek, has lines to say, the character comes across as the emotional equivalent of a mute. That he ends up as a world-famous author, winning prizes and living in a Manhattan hotel, is simply unbelievable. The bad writer (the drifter Henry Fool, played by Thomas Jay Ryan) appears on the scene all too suddenly. He bullies James Urbaniek about his writing and seduces Parker Posey. He is so unlikable, it is depressing to think that any woman would throw herself at him, for any reason. In fact, the whole movie is depressing, even the sets...there always seems to be a faucet dripping somewhere and the rooms look dank. Did I mention that the mother (played by Maria Porter) kills herself in the tub? Then James Urbaniek drags her corpse out to the sidewalk. I have no idea why she kills herself (I think we are supposed to think that she, like Parker Posey, has been attracted to Henry Fool). I have no idea, either, why James Urbaniek drags the corpse outside. I don't mind being baffled by characters or angered by them, but at some point I have to connect, and I couldn't do that with anyone in Hartley's film.



Henry Fool

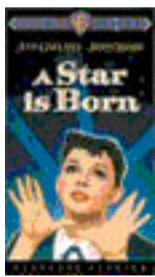
"Henry Fool" is the only movie I've seen recently that is a triple threat: bad writing, bad acting, bad directing. Here's how truly bad this one was: James Urbaniek is now a pizza-delivery boy in a Budweiser commercial, and probably glad to get the work.

You see where I'm going with this? Sam's spontaneity is a valuable attribute, but not in a video-rental store. Spontaneity leads to "Henry Fool," to "Chinese Box," to movies that deserve to be left on the shelf for other unsuspecting renters. Because rentals are so inexpensive compared with a night out at the movies, a lot of viewers, who would read movie reviews and ask friends for their opinions before splurging, simply walk into a video-rental store and get whatever's handy. But if you care what you see, wouldn't you put some thought into this? It's about fall-backs.

Sam and I had thought one alternate video-rental choice was an adequate back-up plan. Maybe because my mother was Swiss, and I tend in general to live life in alphabetical order, I now insist on an expanded back-up plan, with several alternate choices. This can make an ordinary non-Swiss person like Sam fidgety. But I am slowly convincing him: if you care what you see, you need to plan in advance.

Here's my fail-safe Swiss method: first and foremost, you'll want to have several movies in mind. I write them down, but that's just my rigidity and precision at work. If you're having one of those lazy Saturday afternoons and nothing comes to mind, try thinking of themes. For example, you'd be surprised how many wonderful movies have been made about lawyers: "Adam's Rib," "Witness for the Prosecution," "Anatomy of a Murder." The lawyers in these movies are lawyers as we wish them to be: savvy, committed, with flaws and foibles, like the rest of us. Even a sense of humor (very un-lawyer-like). Or sports: "Major League" (baseball), "The Best of Times" (football), "Hoosiers" (basketball). The great thing about good sports movies is that they're all the same no matter the sport: the team is down and out, the team struggles mightily, the team wins the big game. What could be more comforting?

Another approach is to go for originals and sequels. There are three versions of "Little Women," and I like all of them. The first has the best Jo of all time — Katherine Hepburn. Some people are born to certain roles, and Hepburn's lanky, edgy Jo is perfect. But the second version has an ensemble cast that's very, very good: June Allyson's Jo is a little coy for my taste, but there's Elizabeth Taylor's Amy and Spring Byington as Marmee and Leon Ames as the father and Peter Lawford as Laurie. And best of all there's Margaret O'Brien, one of the few child actors who wasn't just a short adult...nobody dies better than Margaret O'Brien. Overall, Version Two has a perfect post-World War II glow about it. As for third version, I like it in spite of myself. In its updated and revised plot, Marmee saves Beth's life when she is first ill, not the doctor, and Susan Sarandon as Marmee makes some '70s feminist statements about what women should aspire to. But I liked it because the sets seemed so right. That may seem like an odd reason, but sometimes the sound-stage approach of the older films can detract from the overall effect. In Version Three of "Little Women" snow really looked like snow, and the rooms really did seem to be lit by dim candles.



A Star Is Born

Then there's "A Star Is Born." There are three of those and only the first two count. In the first version, Fredric March as Norman Maine wades into the surf when he realizes he's standing in the way of his wife's movie career. The wife, meanwhile, is in the kitchen, happily whipping up dinner for the two of them. I was just a kid when I saw this, and I wanted to scream at the wife to get out of the kitchen and get down to the beach and save this man! The second version starred Judy Garland and James Mason, and this one makes it pretty clear how an actor, even someone as great as Mason, can be left behind by a talent like Garland. The inner workings of the studio are spelled out, too...the capricious way names are changed to make them look better on a marquee, the fun of being one of a group of contract players, and what happens when one partner is on the way up, while the other is on the way down. The third (and I hope the final) version starred Barbra Streisand and Kris

Kristofferson. I can rest my case here. The whole point of a movie like "A Star Is Born" is to trace the evolution of a relationship, to track what happens when an older, established star marries a younger, inexperienced, tentative newcomer. Maybe this movie would work if Kris played the younger, tentative newcomer, because it doesn't matter what costume Barbra wears or what character she plays, she's still Barbra. (People have said the same about Garland, but Garland's persona is vulnerable, tentative, uncertain, in need of everyone's — even the audience's — protection.) And the suicide scene is so bizarre: Kristofferson drives his car off a cliff while drinking beer. Can you see either Fredric March or James Mason swilling cheap beer while barreling down the highway? I don't think so, because March and Mason portray "actors" who adore themselves (and their protégés); they wouldn't kill themselves in a way that would destroy their looks or bring their wives any more grief than their deaths already do.

And then there are series like The Thin Man movies (you could start with "The Thin Man," but they're all good.) And the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals. (You could start with "Shall We Dance?" but, again, they're all terrific.) These are movies you want when your life is too connected: too many cell phones and laptops, and e-mail from people you don't know. These films show us a life most of us never knew: people who have money and don't seem to feel guilty about spending it on fabulous apartments and great clothes. People who dress for dinner, who smoke unfiltered cigarettes and drink martinis and look good even when they're hung over (there is no one cuter than Myrna Loy pretending to be hung over). Or on a more somber note, John Wayne from the beginning ("Stagecoach") to the end ("The Shootist") — a way to study a man who gets old but never changes. The kid from "Stagecoach" gets heavier and adds some wrinkles, but he continues to represent a West that never existed but seems real anyway, a West of clear contrast between good and evil where good miraculously prevails.



Shall We Dance

So much of life seems random; renting videos doesn't have to be.

VIDEOS DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

"The Sixth Sense," M. Night Shyamalan, director. Starring Bruce Willis, Haley Joel Osment, Toni Collette. Run time: 107 minutes. Walt Disney Home Videos, 2000 (theatrical release 1999).

"Rosemary's Baby," Roman Polanski, director. Starring John Cassavetes, Mia Farrow, Ruth Gordon, Ralph Bellamy. Run time: 134 minutes. Paramount, 1991 (theatrical release 1968).

"Chinese Box," Wayne Wang, director. Starring Jeremy Irons, Gong Li, Ruben Blades. Run time: 99 minutes.

Vidmark/Trimark, 1999 (theatrical release 1998).

"Henry Fool," Hal Hartley, director. Starring Parker Posey, James Urbaniek, Thomas Jay Ryan. Run time: 137 minutes. Vidmark/Trimark, 1998 (theatrical release 1998).

"Adam's Rib," George Cukor, director. Starring Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Judy Holliday, Tom Ewell, David Wayne. Run time: 101 minutes. Warner Studios, 2000 (theatrical release 1949).

"Witness for the Prosecution," Billy Wilder, director. Starring Marlene Dietrich, Tyrone Power, Charles Laughton, Elsa Lanchester. Run time: 116 minutes. MGM/UA Studios, 1999 (theatrical release 1957).

"Anatomy of a Murder," Otto Preminger, director. Starring James Stewart, Lee Remick, Ben Gazzara, Arthur O'Connell. Run time: 160 minutes. Columbia/Tristar Studios, 1989 (theatrical release 1959).

"Major League," David S. Ward, director. Starring Tom Berenger, Corbin Bernsen, Charlie Sheen, Wesley Snipes, Bob Uecker. Run time: 107 minutes. Paramount Studios, 1997 (theatrical release 1989).

"The Best of Times," Roger Spottiswoode, director. Starring Robin Williams, Kurt Russell, Pamela Reed. Run time: 104 minutes. Vidmark/Trimark, 1999 (theatrical release 1985).

"Hoosiers," David Anspaugh, director. Starring Gene Hackman, Barbara Hersey, Dennis Hopper. Run time: 114 minutes. Family Home Entertainment, 2000 (theatrical release 1986).

"Little Women," George Cukor, director. Joan Bennett, Spring Byington, Katharine Hepburn. MGM/UA, 1985. Run time: 116 minutes. (theatrical release 1933).

"Little Women," Mervyn LeRoy, director. Starring June Allyson, Peter Lawford, Margaret O'Brien. Run time: 122 minutes. MGM/UA Family Entertainment, 1995(theatrical release 1949).

"Little Women," Gillian Armstrong, director. Starring Susan Sarandon, Claire Danes, Winona Ryder. Run time: 118 minutes. Columbia/Tristar, 1995 (theatrical release 1994).

"A Star Is Born," William Wellman, director. Starring Janet Gaynor, Fredric March, Adolphe Menjou. Run time: 110 minutes. Direct Source, 2000 (theatrical release 1937).

"A Star Is Born," George Cukor, director. Starring Judy Garland, James Mason, Jack Carson. Run time: 175 minutes. Warner Home Video, 2000 (theatrical release 1954).

"A Star Is Born," Frank Pierson, director. Starring Barbra Streisand, Kris Kristofferson, Gary Busey. Run time: 140 minutes. Warner Studios, 1992 (theatrical release 1976).

"Stagecoach," John Ford, director. Starring John Wayne, Claire Trevor, Andy Devine, John Carradine, Thomas Mitchell. Run time: 97 minutes. Warner Home Video, 1991 (theatrical release 1939).

"The Shootist," Don Siegal, director. Starring John Wayne, Lauren Bacall, Ron Howard, James Stewart. Run time: 100 minutes. IDG Books Worldwide, 1998 (theatrical release 1976).

"The Thin Man," W. S. Van Dyke, director. Starring William Powell, Myrna Loy, Maureen O'Sullivan. Run time: 90 minutes. MGM/UA Home Video, 1998 (theatrical release 1934).

"Shall We Dance," Mark Sandrich, director. Starring Fred Astaire, Ginger Rodgers, Edward Everett Horton. Run time: 109 minutes. Turner Home Video, 1999 (theatrical release 1937).

©2000 Frigate: The Transverse Review of Books www.frigatezine.com

All rights reserved on behalf of the authors.

We welcome your comments and suggestions on our site. Please email [<webmaster@frigatezine.com>](mailto:webmaster@frigatezine.com).

Back to [Frigatezine Home Page](#)