



**NIGHTMARES & DAYDREAMS – A CENTENARY
CELEBRATION OF SCREENWRITER NIGEL KNEALE**

The Woman in Black

Nigel Kneale has demonstrated his predilection for ghost stories in such distinctive television dramas as *The Road* (BBC, tx. 29/9/1963), *Quatermass and the Pit* (BBC, 1958-59), and *The Stone Tape* (BBC, tx. 25/12/1972), using science fiction trappings to update and transmogrify the form. *The Woman in Black* (ITV, tx. 24/12/1989) is a much more traditional effort however, based on Susan Hill's eponymous novel (a title deliberately evoking Wilkie Collins' celebrated Victorian mystery 'The Woman in White').

Kneale's script removes the novel's framing device and transposes its generalised Victorian setting specifically to 1925, while also altering many of the incidental details. His fascination with science and technology is still much in evidence, with references to the cinema, the fact that Eel Marsh House has been electrified (still a comparative novelty in rural areas then) and Mrs Drablow's use of a sound recording machine. However, many of the other elements of the story, with its naïve protagonist sent to a remote town populated with hostile locals, and the emphasis on churches, graveyards and ancient ruins, are very familiar to the genre.

Pauline Moran, best known as Miss Lemon in Agatha Christie's *Poirot* (ITV), proves utterly mesmerising as the grimacing and malevolent ghost, especially in the scene in which she swoops down on the bed-ridden hero, the horror only curtailed through the intervention of a commercial break.

Although the villagers of the evocatively named 'Crythin Gifford' believe that the title character is an evil spirit who murders children in revenge for the tragic loss of her son, the film's focus on the hard life of people in the country and the city turns her into more of a harbinger, a symbol of the cruel fate and economic hardship suffered by many as a result of the war, with the Depression only a few years away.

Hill was reportedly unhappy with some of Kneale's changes to her novel, preferring the hugely successful stage version, which has been playing to packed houses in the West End since 1989, with no end currently in sight. The ITV adaptation, however, has been repeated only once since its initial transmission, which is a shame as it's one of the few feature-length ghost stories made for television that is able to sustain its length, thanks also to several fine character studies, an intriguing narrative, some extremely well-executed shocks and a memorably nihilistic finale.

Sergio Angelini, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

In Susan Hill's original story, there is only one way to get to the haunted Eel Marsh House – across the marshes, making sure to beware of the perilous tides that have claimed more than one victim. Through adaptations of the novel there are now several eerie routes to that desolate place where the woman in black resides, including the long-running stage play and the recent film. My favourite dark path to Eel Marsh House is the 1989 television version of the now famous tale.

Originally appearing rather innocuously on ITV on Christmas Eve, the TV adaptation makes for a spine-tingling viewing experience. It begins with the young and eager Arthur Kidd's (Adrian Rawlins) journey north from London to attend to the estate of the recently deceased Mrs Drablow. What he finds in the small town of Crythin Gifford are all the ingredients of a classic ghost story: an old dark house, highly suspicious locals and a shocking family secret.

Ghost stories for Christmas are a British TV tradition and they're most closely associated with the BBC, but this offering from Central for ITV ranks with the very best MR James adaptations. Although the novel has a framing device that's set at Christmas, both screen adaptations abandon any festive reference. They also dispense with an older Arthur recounting his experiences, making the fear at the heart of the story more immediate and threatening.

In adapting the novel for television, the great Nigel Kneale made a technological addition to Eel Marsh House which was typical of his work. Here, the late Mrs Drablow not only had electricity but she made use of a phonograph so that in Kneale's version the dead don't just appear, they can tell tales.

This version of *The Woman in Black* is rarely seen and has been described by no less a fan of horror than Reece Shearsmith as 'the most terrifying programme I've ever seen'. Without giving away any spoilers, there are some shocking moments in this TV adaptation which will linger in the memory of anyone who sees it.

Veteran director Herbert Wise manages the manifestations of the woman in black perfectly and they are all the more startling for their rarity. Nancy Banks-Smith remarked that 'the spectre arrives suddenly like a migraine and causes a genuine physical reaction as if one layer of your skin had shifted over another.' This is the thrill of *The Woman in Black*, it's not content to merely scare you, it wants to terrify you – to make you afraid to turn around and see what might be behind you. It's a creeping fear that's not easily laughed off afterwards.

Roger Clarke wrote in the BFI Compendium *Gothic: The Dark Heart of Film* that the notion of a ghostly woman in black runs deep in British culture and, though it's been with us for centuries, there is still something pleasurable about a tale in which grown men are paralysed with fear at the thought of a malevolent female phantom. As the woman in black herself, Pauline Moran is an electrifying presence with a stare that is Medusa-like in its intensity.

By coincidence, Adrian Rawlins, who turns in a terrific performance in *The Woman in Black*, went on to play James Potter, father of Harry, in the Harry Potter films and Daniel Radcliffe appeared as young Arthur Kipps in the 2012 film version. Arthur is already a haunted and broken man in the film, and writer Jane Goldman uses his experience as a neat mirror to that of the character of the woman in black.

In its transfer to the big screen the story acquires more jumps and a higher body count but both versions generate their own misty supernatural atmosphere. Film director James Watkins somehow makes his Eel Marsh House as beautiful and alluring as it is menacing. Both adaptations also make good use of that universally sinister setting, a neglected Victorian nursery, complete with creepy toys.

Like the best classic ghost stories and Victorian sensation novels, *The Woman in Black* revolves around a past that won't stay buried and people that won't, or can't, forget. These tales seem to hold even more fascination as the year closes, providing chills which enhance the festivities. We're more likely to curl up by the glow of the television than the fireside these days, and there is no finer treat than a ghost story for a winter's evening.

As for the woman in black, unlike everybody else in Crythin Gifford, I can't wait to see her again. However you call in with her, I would urge you to pay a visit – she will haunt you.

Lisa Kerrigan, bfi.org.uk, 9 December 2013

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

Director: Herbert Wise
Production Company: Central Independent Television
Developed in association with: Capglobe Ltd
Executive Producer: Ted Childs
Producer: Chris Burt
Production Manager: Jeannie Stone
Production Co-ordinator: Dena Vincent
Accountant: Terry Connors
Assistant Accountant: Josephine O'Neill
Location Manager: Paul Shersby
Producer's Assistant: Sandra Frieze
1st Assistant Director: Bill Kirk
2nd Assistant Director: Trevor Puckle
3rd Assistant Director: Cliff Lanning
Script Supervisor: Pauline Harlow
Casting: Marilyn Johnson
Casting Assistant: Laura Scott
Written by: Nigel Kneale
Based on the book by: Susan Hill
Director of Photography: Michael Davis
Camera Operator: Nick Beeks-Sanders
Focus Puller: Tony Breeze
Clapper Loader: Lucy Bristow
Gaffer Electrician: Steve Blake
Best Boy: Ronnie McKay
Grip: Stuart Godfrey
Special Effects: Ace Effects
Editor: Laurence Méry-Clark
Assistant Editors: Sarah Rains, Sarah Morton, Antonia Van Drimmelen
Production Designer: Jon Bunker
Art Director: John Ralph
Set Decorator: Ann Mollo
Production Buyer: Ian Gill
Property Master: Brian Payne
Standby Propmen: Graeme Purdy, Steven Payne
Dressing Propmen: Dennis Simmonds, Martin Kingsley
Construction: The John Maher Film Set Co. Ltd
Costume Designer: Barbara Kronig
Costume Supervisor: Paul Vachon
Costume Assistant: Sarah Burns

Chief Make-up Artist: Christine Allsopp
Make-up Artist: Connie Reeve
Chief Hairdresser: Vera Mitchell
Assistant Hairdresser: Caroline Clements
Titles: Trevor Bond
Music: Rachel Portman
Sound Recording: Tony Dawe
Sound Assistant: Orin Beaton
Boom Operator: Chris Gurney
Dubbing Mixer: Richard King
Dubbing Editor: John Downer
Publicist: Jennifer Collen-Smith

Cast

Adrian Rawlins (*Arthur Kidd*)
Bernard Hepton (*Sam Toovey*)
David Daker (*Josiah Freston*)
Pauline Moran (*woman in black*)
David Ryall (*Sweetman*)
Clare Holman (*Stella Kidd*)
John Cater (*Arnold Pepperell*)
John Franklyn-Robbins (*Reverend Greet*)
Fiona Walker (*Margaret Toovey*)
William Simons (*John Keckwick*)
Robin Weaver (*Bessie*)
Caroline John (*Stella's mother*)
Joseph Upton (*Eddie Kidd*)
Steven Mackintosh (*Rolfe*)
Andrew Nyman (*Jackie*)
Robert Hamilton (*Mr Girdler*)
Trevor Cooper (*farmer*)
Alison King (*gypsy woman*)
Peter Guinness (*stallholder*)
Timothy Block (*lorry man*)
Albie Woodington (*fireman*)
Mary Lawlor, Clare Thomson (*gypsy children*)

ITV tx 24.12.1989

UK 1989

103 mins

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