



IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

# Let the Right One In

According to Mexican maestro Guillermo del Toro, creator of the award-winning *Pan's Labyrinth*, it's 'a chilling fairytale, as delicate, haunting and poetic a film as you'll ever see'. For Hollywood director Matt Reeves, who topped the US box-office charts with the internet-friendly sci-fi shocker *Cloverfield*, it's 'touching and scary, an amazing mixture of a coming-of-age story and a really scary horror film'. While for Britain's pre-eminent fantasy-film commentator Kim Newman, it's 'a love story and a contemporary horror film' which has already 'secured a place on the list of the ten best vampire movies'.

Since it premiered in its native Sweden back in January 2008, *Let the Right One In* has been gathering acclaim from all quarters. It's the tale of Oskar, a 12-year-old misfit who is bullied at school. Out in the snow-covered courtyard of his apartment block one night, he meets his neighbour Eli. Gradually they strike up a tender friendship.

John Ajvide Lindqvist's source novel takes its titular inspiration from the lyrics of pop's own 'Moaning Myrtle', Morrissey: 'Let the right one slip in/And when at last it does/I'd say you were within your rights to bite/The right one and say, "What kept you so long?"' According to Tomas Alfredson, who directed the film from Lindqvist's screenplay, the book contains 'a strange mixture between the social-realistic style and the vampire stuff'. Audience responses have ranged from the intense chin-stroking of arthouse academics at the Tribeca Film Festival to the whoops and cheers of UK FrightFest fans, who found it the most satisfying shocker of the year. It's hard to remember the last time a genre movie enjoyed such widespread crossover appeal – or the last time a 'social-realist' fable found such favour with the gorehounds.

Despite the many laudatory labels that have been attached to it, *Let the Right One In* falls into that category of truly great movies which are best defined not by what they are, but by what they are not. Most poignantly, *Let the Right One In* was (infamously) not an Oscar contender at the 2009 awards, nor did it have the chance to be so. Thanks to the Academy's notoriously foolish regulations governing their 'Films Not in the English Language' category, each country is allowed to submit only one title for consideration per year. Sweden punted Jan Troell's more clearly categorisable drama *Everlasting Moments* which, despite getting a nod at the Golden Globes, promptly failed even to make Oscar's shortlist.

Explanations about 'eligibility cut-off' dates aside, many understandably assumed that Alfredson's indefinable masterpiece had been passed over by the Swedish selectors precisely because they thought it was a generic horror film and therefore somehow unworthy of an Academy Award. Yet perversely at the 2008 Sitges Film Festival, considered by many to be the showcase of international horror and fantasy films, *Let the Right One In* was beaten to the prize for Best Motion Picture by Jennifer Lynch's daft and utterly generic serial-killer thriller *Surveillance* – to the shock and dismay of the assembled cognoscenti. Perhaps the problem with *Let the Right One In* was that it wasn't a box-ticking horror movie after all.

But what about the much discussed vampire theme – surely that provides a peg upon which to hang the movie? Perhaps so, but only in the sense that *Let the Right One In* transcends and redefines its generic bloodsucking heritage, occupying a position within/without the genre similar to that of Guillermo del Toro's equally slippery *Cronos*. The oft-quoted interpretative truism about vampire texts is that they are all essentially 'about' sex and death. This lazily reductive reading finds its roots in Bram Stoker's (disputed) death from tertiary syphilis in 1912 and reaches its apotheosis in the outbreak of modern vampire movies in the 1980s and 90s (Tony Scott's *The Hunger*, Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, John Landis' *Innocent Blood*, Shimako Sato's *Tale of a Vampire* et al) which commanded obligatory column inches about Aids scares and late 20th-century fears of fornication. More recently *Twilight*, from the novel by Mormon author Stephenie Meyer, has provoked heated debate about 'abstinence porn', its 'no sex' riff being seen as perversely but profoundly 'sexy', helping it to become the most money-spinning vampire movie ever.

By contrast, *Let the Right One In* is absolutely not about sex, even when its young protagonists embrace and become conjoined in an evocative *danse macabre*. The bloodline here is closer to *Cronos*, which specifically de-sexualised the lusty tropes of vampire cinema, offering instead a portrait of ageing and illness epitomised by the site of Federico Luppi licking blood from the clean white tiles of a toilet floor – the most sexless scene imaginable. Despite its hormonally charged coming-of-age motif, *Let the Right One In* is similarly more about friendship than fucking; it is significant that the paedophile elements present in Lindqvist's novel have been obscured in the translation from book to film, as has the source's strange transgenderism. As director Alfredson has said, the vampirism in his 1980s-set film looks back not in lust but in anger, with Oskar's social impotence rather than his pubescent potency providing the driving force of the narrative.

So, if it's not quite a horror movie, not really a vampire movie, and not obviously an Oscars movie – what else isn't *Let the Right One In*? Well, as we noted before, it isn't an English-language movie, nor a Hollywood movie, although both of those things are about to change. In May 2008, *Variety* reported that the remake rights had been jointly secured by stalwart British horror studio Hammer Films, recently revived by the Dutchbased fund Cyrte Investments. Ironically, it was Hammer who sealed the very genre clichés which *Let the Right One In* so utterly eschews, and which have long been the stuff of broad parody, most recently in the stylishly lame *Lesbian Vampire Killers*. Yet the remake will not be a British translation but an American affair directed by *Cloverfield* director Matt Reeves, who has spoken of his plans to move the action to snowy Colorado. 'The movie and the book are incredibly Swedish,' Reeves told the US press, 'yet there's something so universal about the tale of this kid and something that, in the context of an American story, could be completely different while being very consistent with the original story.' He added that 'there's something about it that can be an American mythic tale.'

This last phrase gives cause for concern because, whatever else it isn't, Alfredson's *Let the Right One In* is definitely not 'an American mythic tale'. Nor does it fit into the heritage of horror on which Hammer's international reputation was built, and which still grants them saleable 'brand awareness' to this day. Which is not to say that Lindqvist's sacred Swedish text could not be 're-imagined' as an utterly different beast to Alfredson's adaptation.

Perhaps Reeves will be able to prevent his forthcoming film from being putrefied into the bland multiplex fare which has rendered Stateside Asian horror remakes so dreary and depressing in the past decade. But once again we find ourselves defining *Let the Right One In* only in absentia – existing outside the generic trends to which it alludes, but to which it refuses to conform.

In the end, of course, this is the film's greatest strength. Kim Newman concludes that *Let the Right One In* would be 'atypical in any decade' and it is exactly this sense of ill-fitting which makes it such a masterpiece. If we must have a thematic touchstone for the film, it is more useful to look outside the genre to Rob Reiner's *Stand by Me*, a movie which seems stylistically incomparable but which bears a similarly oblique relationship to 'horror'. Based on Stephen King's short story 'The Body', *Stand by Me* is a coming-of-age tale with a rotting corpse at its heart, inspired by a macabre incident in King's own childhood which armchair psychologists have rushed to identify as the wellspring of his money-spinning dark dreams.

Setting it significantly in 'the same apartment where I grew up', Lindqvist describes his novel as a form of revenge for the angst he suffered as a child. 'There's a kind of poetic justice,' he told *Death Ray's* Guy Haley, 'in the fact that the misfortunes of your childhood can be the basis for the fortunes of adulthood.' Alfredson, meanwhile, identified with the 'rough times' endured by his film's young hero, this autobiographical echo offering him a way into the story. In this I suspect that he is not alone – the empathy which audiences clearly feel with Oskar's isolated plight is, if not universal, then at least not unusual.

It is this paradoxical 'universal outsider' appeal which ultimately defines *Let the Right One In*, allowing it to be all the things I have just claimed that it is not – a great horror movie, a spine-tingling love story, a masterful social-realist fable and (most ironically) a genre-defining vampire tract. It manages to be these things precisely because it is at once all of them and none of them. It is, in the very best sense of the word, a genuinely 'difficult' film. Sink your teeth into that.

**Mark Kermode, *Sight and Sound*, May 2009**

## LET THE RIGHT ONE IN (LÅT DEN RÄTTE KOMMA IN)

*Director:* Tomas Alfredson

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*A co-production with:* Sveriges Television, Filmpool Nord

*Production Companies:* Sandrew Metronome, WAG, Fido Film,

Chimney Pot, Ljudligan

*With the support of:* Svenska Filminstitutet, Nordisk Film- och TV-Fond

*In collaboration with:* Canal+

*Producers:* John Nordling, Carl Molinder

*Line Producer:* Frida Asp

*For Nordisk Film- & TV-Fond:* Svend Abrahamsen

*Location Managers:* Fredrik Sidevörn, Sofia Lindberg

*Post-production Supervisors:* John Thorstensson, Linda Dahlin

*1st Assistant Director:* Anna Zackrisson

*Script Supervisor:* Magdalena Johansson

*Casting:* Anna Zackrisson

*Child Casting:* Maggie Widstrand

*Screenplay:* John Ajvide Lindqvist

*Dramaturg:* Dennis Magnusson

*Based on the novel by:* John Ajvide Lindqvist

*Director of Photography:* Hoyte van Hoytema

*Underwater Photography:* Eric Börjesson

*Digital Special Effects:* Fido Film

*Graphic Designer:* Anna Lindqvist

*Editors:* Dino Jonsäter, Tomas Alfredson

*Digital Post-production:* Chimney Pot

*Visual Effects On-line Editor:* Linda Öhlund

*Editing Consultant:* Louise Brattberg

*Art Director:* Eva Norén

*Set Decorators:* Emil Eriksson, Britta Rehn

*Concept Artist:* Josef Norén

*Costumes:* Maria Strid

*Make-up:* Maria Strid

*Music:* Johan Söderqvist

*Orchestra:* Slovak National Symphony Orchestra

*Guitar:* Mats Bergström

*Electric Guitar:* Mattias Torell

*Bass Guitar:* Uno Helmersson

*Waterphone/Piano:* Johan Söderqvist

*Drums:* Erik Nilsson

*Orchestra Leader:* Hans Ek

*Conductor:* Hans Ek

*Sound Designer/Producer:* Per Sundström

*Sound Designers:* Patrik Strömdahl, Jonas Jansson

*Sound Recordists:* Christoffer Demby, Maths Källqvist, Mikael Brodin

*Re-recording Mixers:* Per Sundström, Petter Fladeby

*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Kimmo Rajala

*Animal Trainers:* Filmdjur, Annelie Arrefelt

## Cast

Kåre Hedebrant (*Oskar*)

Lina Leandersson (*Eli*)

Per Ragnar (*Håkan*)

Henrik Dahl (*Erik*)

Karin Bergquist (*Yvonne*)

Peter Carlberg (*Lacke*)

Ika Nord (*Virginia*)

Mikael Rahm (*Jocke*)

Karl-Robert Lindgren (*Gösta*)

Anders T. Peedu (*Morgan*)

Pale Olofsson (*Larry*)

Cayetano Ruiz (*Schoolmaster Avila*)

Patrick Rydmark (*Conny*)

Johan Sömnes (*Andreas*)

Mikael Erhardsson (*Martin*)

Rasmus Luthander (*Jimmy*)

Sören Källstigen (*Janne, Erik's friend*)

Malin Cederbladh (*hospital receptionist*)

Bernt Östman (*Virginia's nurse*)

Kajsa Linderholm (*teacher*)

Adam Stone (*policeman in classroom*)

Ingemar Raukola (*messenger*)

Kent Rishaug (*kiosk owner*)

Linus Hanner (*boy who dies*)

Tom Ljungman (*young man 1*)

Fredrik Ramel (*young man 2*)

Christoffer Bohlin (*young man 3*)

Julia Nilsson (*singer 1*)

Elin Almén (*singer 2*)

Sweden/Norway/France 2008©

114 mins

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