



**WOMAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA**

# The Babadook

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Post-millennial horror has proven to be particularly accommodating to women directors, from the Soska Sisters, Jen and Sylvia (*Dead Hooker in a Trunk* (2009), *American Mary* (2012), *Rabid* (2019)) and Ana Lily Amirpour (*A Girl Walks Home at Night* (2014)), from Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day* (2001)) to Alice Lowe (*Prevenge* (2016)), from Hélène Cattet (*Amer* (2009), *L'étrange couleur des larmes de ton corps* (2013), *Laissez bronzer les cadavres* (2017)) to Coralie Fargeat (*Revenge* (2017)). Emma Dark (*Island of the Blind Dead* (2015), *Salient Minus Ten* (2017)), Prano Bailey-Bond (*Man vs Sand* (2012), *Nasty* (2015)) and O.B. de Alessi (*The House* (2015), *Kuo's Eyes* (2016)) among others have been crafting excellent short films over the past few years. Julia Ducournau's *Raw* caused waves when it opened in 2016 while *XX* (2017) was an anthology horror, the work of four women writers and directors (Roxanne Benjamin, Karyn Kusama, Annie Clark and Jovanka Vuckovic). Other notable names include Karyn Kusama (*Jennifer's Body* (2009), *The Invitation* (2015)), Leigh Janiak (*Honeymoon* (2014)), Anna Biller (*The Love Witch* (2016)), Kerry Anne Mullaney (*The Dead Outside* (2008)), Axelle Carolyn (*Soulmate* (2013)), Ruth Platt (*The Lesson* (2015)) and Kate Shenton (*Egomaniac* (2016)).

In 2014, they were joined by Australian Jennifer Kent, a former actor who turned director after seeking advice from Lars von Trier (she assisted him on his *Dogville* (2003)) and directed the short film *Monster* (2005) and two episodes of the Australian horror/science fiction television anthology *Two Twisted* (2006). *Monster* – which Kent later referred to as 'baby Babadook' – explores some of the themes of her feature debut, featuring a young mother (Susan Prior) battling not only her own inadequacies and paranoias but also her son's fear of a monster – which may or may not be imaginary – that he claims is living in his bedroom closet.

In *The Babadook*, the frazzled mother is played – brilliantly – by Essie Davis, a friend of Kent's from her drama school days. Amelia Vanek is near the end of her tether – her husband was recently killed in a car accident leaving her to bring up their troubled six-year-old son Samuel (Noah Wiseman) alone. Samuel has become convinced that there's a monster in the house and is refusing to sleep. Things take a turn for the even worse when she reads him a bedtime story, a macabre pop-up book called *Mister Babadook* that mysteriously appears in the house and finds herself apparently haunted by the grotesque, top hat-wearing title character.

For the most part, Kent keeps things nicely vague – it's not clear for a very long time if the Babadook is actually real, the product of Samuel's increasingly disturbing behaviour or even a figment of Amelia's imagination. Strange things happen around the house but how many of them are due to the supernatural and how much is due to the various mental disorders that afflict mother and son is unclear. If the film misteps, it's when it becomes clear that the Babadook is real, removing all the traces of doubt that the early part of the film had been so careful to maintain. Unresolved grief is the real horror of *The Babadook*, not some weird supernatural goblin – Amelia has never had the time to process the loss of her husband Oskar, who turns up in the form of actor Benjamin Winspear when the Babadook forces her to relive the fatal

car crash as he drove her to hospital to give birth to Samuel. The Babadook is less a real monster than the all-consuming despair that has been eating away at Amelia since the crash.

In a sense, the Babadook is related to the rage that manifests as a pack of feral children in David Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979). In both films, a mother is forced to question her parental skills and in both cases their fears and anguish manifest a dangerous, diminutive force that threatens both them and the child that they no longer feel they can care for as well as they might be expected to. When the Babadook forces Amelia to relive her trauma she is finally able to conquer it, metaphorically locking it in the basement. An epilogue suggests that with their psychic trauma finally under lock and key, and with Amelia having finally confronted her repressed guilt and grief both she and Samuel are on the road to recovery – the Babadook is still a real presence in their lives but now they're in control.

Essie Davis is the film's most valuable player. Vulnerable, fragile, constantly on the edge of total emotional collapse, she still manages to hint at and then finally fully explore Amelia's hidden strengths. Her sudden change in character shouldn't work but in the capable hands of Kent and Davies it does and is, in its own disturbing way, just as frightening as the Babadook. Her transition from downtrodden, mousey shell to enraged avenger is startling but brilliantly done. Noah Wiseman has come in for some stick from some fans who found his character Samuel too annoying and even repellent, sort of missing the point that that was Kent's intention all along. By any standards, Samuel is a horrible little brat, but it's hardly his fault that he's as messed up as he is and it's testament to Amelia's unquestioning love for the child that clings to her, frightens her and tests her already stretched patience to the limit that she can see past his presenting problems and will lay her own life on the line to protect him. The epilogue suggests that her faith in him was justified – the Babadook allows Samuel to face his inner demons too and both he and his mother appear to be heading for better lives having tamed the monster.

The Babadook itself is a nicely creepy addition to the pantheon of screen monsters. Realised with cheap and ragged but undeniably effective practical effects wherever possible, Though his *modus operandi* is straight out of every mother's most deep-rooted nightmare – he's come for her child and is very likely to eat him alive – he's a unique visual presence and a frequently unnerving one to boot. Unexpectedly, he's become something of a gay icon after a Tumblr joke that he was openly gay. In 2017, he made his first appearance on banners and placards during marches for Pride Month.

The film was largely well received when it was released and although it was only a moderate hit in its native Australia, it did far better than expected at the North American and European box offices. The film's commercial success was boosted immeasurably when *The Exorcist* (1973) director William Friedkin took to Twitter to exclaim 'I've never seen a more terrifying film than THE BABADOOK. It will scare the hell out of you as it did me.'

*The Babadook* is a film that can be enjoyed on several levels – as a straight ahead horror film, for example, or as a study of a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown, or a tale of a dysfunctional family struggling to come to terms with their losses and adversities. And that probably explains its success. When it tries, it is genuinely scary but its most unsettling moments are the quieter ones, those exploring Amelia's tortured psyche. Moving and frightening in equal measure it was one of the finest genre films of 2014.

**Kevin Lyon, 26 August 2018, The Eofftv Review, [eofftvreview.wordpress.com](http://eofftvreview.wordpress.com)**

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## THE BABADOOK

*Director:* Jennifer Kent  
*©:* Babadook Films Pty Ltd, Causeway Films Pty Ltd, South Australian Film Corporation, Screen Australia  
*Production Companies:* Causeway Films, Smoking Gun Productions  
*Developed with the assistance of:* Waking Dream Productions  
*Developed with the assistance of:* Screen Australia Enterprise Program, NSW Government, Screen NSW, Binger Film Lab  
*Financed with the assistance of:* South Australian Film Corporation  
*Principal Investor:* Screen Australia Australian Government  
*Presented by:* Screen Australia, Causeway Films  
*In association with the:* South Australian Film Corporation, Smoking Gun Productions, Entertainment One  
*Executive Producers:* Jonathan Page, Michael Tear, Jan Chapman, Jeff Harrison  
*Producers:* Kristina Ceyton, Kristian Moliere  
*Line Producer:* Julie Byrne  
*Unit Manager:* Joshua Jaeger  
*Location Manager:* Scott McDonald  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Kate Butler  
*1st Assistant Director:* Brad Lanyon  
*Casting:* Nikki Barrett  
*Written by:* Jennifer Kent  
*Director of Photography:* Radek Ladczuk  
*2nd Unit Directors of Photography:* Nima Nabili Rad, Hugh Freytag  
*Steadicam Operator:* Louis Puli  
*Stills Photographer:* Matt Nettheim  
*Special Effects Co-ordinator:* Clint Dodd

*Editor:* Simon Njoo  
*Production Designer:* Alex Holmes  
*Art Directors:* Alex Holmes, Karen Hannaford  
*Set Decorator:* Jennifer Drake  
*Pop-up Book Illustration & Design:* Alex Juhasz  
*Make-up/Hair Supervisor:* Tracy Phillipot  
*Titles Design:* James Boorman  
*Composer:* Jed Kurzel  
*Sound Recordist:* Des Kenneally  
*Re-recording Mixer:* Pete Smith  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Reg Roordink  
*Unit Publicity:* Chris Chamberlin *Pop Culture*

### Cast

Essie Davis (*Amelia*)  
Noah Wiseman (*Samuel*)  
Hayley McElhinney (*Claire*)  
Daniel Henshall (*Robbie*)  
Barbara West (*Mrs Roach*)  
Ben Winspear (*Oskar*)  
Chloe Hurn (*Ruby*)  
Jacqy Phillips (*Beverly*)  
Bridget Walters (*Norma*)

Australia-Canada 2014  
94 mins

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## IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

### One Cut of the Dead (Kamera o tomeru na!)

Fri 16 Dec 18:15; Fri 30 Dec 20:45

### The Fog

Fri 16 Dec 21:00; Wed 28 Dec 18:10

### Häxan

Sat 17 Dec 11:45 (with live piano accompaniment)

### The Uninvited

Sat 17 Dec 14:30 (+ intro by broadcaster and writer, Louise Blain)

### Being Human + Q&A with Toby Whithouse and guests (tbc)

Sat 17 Dec 18:00

### Sugar Hill

Sat 17 Dec 20:40

### Black Sunday (La maschera del demonio)

Sun 18 Dec 18:30

### Cat People

Mon 19 Dec 18:15 (+ intro by Clarisse Loughrey, chief film critic for The Independent)

### Day of the Dead

Mon 19 Dec 20:40; Thu 29 Dec 18:20

### Society

Tue 20 Dec 18:15; Wed 28 Dec 20:50

### Ring (Ringu)

Tue 20 Dec 21:00

### Interview with the Vampire

Wed 21 Dec 18:10; Thu 29 Dec 20:40

### Ginger Snaps

Wed 21 Dec 20:50; Tue 27 Dec 15:10

### Let the Right One In (Låt den rätte komma in)

Thu 22 Dec 18:15

### The Lure (Córki dancing)

Thu 22 Dec 20:45 (+ intro by Dr Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies at King's College London)

### Arrebato

Fri 23 Dec 18:05

### A Dark Song

Fri 23 Dec 20:45; Fri 30 Dec 18:20

### Sweetheart

Tue 27 Dec 12:40

### Atlantics (Atlantique) + Atlantiques

Tue 27 Dec 18:20

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