



Film

Things that go bump in the night



Matt Neithem/Causeway Films Pty Ltd

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The Babadook

Directed by Jennifer Kent
Running time: 93 min

It's rare that a horror film captures the critical attention that *The Babadook* has. After the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, this small-budget Australian horror movie generated word-of-mouth praise seldom received by films in this downmarket, critically reviled genre. Yet it amply earns its praise, by using the trappings and conventions of horror films to tell a much more sensitive and nuanced story beyond the usual fare of jump scares, chainsaws, and gore.

Which is not to say that the film isn't frightening. In fact, it is one of the scariest films I've seen in a theatre, one that stuck with me long after the lights had come on. What makes director Jennifer Kent's debut feature such a success is the way that it succeeds as a horror film, while also embracing an emotional subtlety that few films of this genre (or any other) attempt.

The film centres around a widowed mother, Essie Davis, and her young son. After the death of her husband in a car crash, Davis' withdrawn nature has isolated her from her family and other support networks, and her son's behaviour has caused trouble at home and at school. When he brings home a strange new book about Mr Babadook, she is concerned about her son's reaction to the unsettling story.

Kent excels in depicting Davis' home in the film, establishing a layout that creates a subtle pressure on the viewer without beating you over the head with it. There's a constant sense of tension that comes from Kent's use of negative space, a sensation that something should be standing there, but isn't. It's a subtle effect, and very well deployed. Another of Kent's tricks that might go unnoticed at first is secretly the film's strongest point: the sound design. The home is full of strange hums and ticks, and the ambient soundtrack of the film creates a delicious tension in the viewer.

The first films of early cinema were thuddingly realistic affairs, documentary clips of people walking, steam trains, and other ephemera of everyday life; it took decades for filmmakers to develop an audiovisual vocabulary to depict the inner lives of their characters. Kent is not the first filmmaker to use horror as a tool to examine the emotional state of a character, but few have done it with the grace and assuredness that she displays here. In every way, *The Babadook* is film-making at its finest.

Aaron van Dorn

Book

Comfortably numb



Electric Reads

****: **The anatomy of melancholy**

Matt Selwyn

Electric Reads, London, UK

Pp 208. £7.99

ISBN 978-0993130502

Art is a racket to scam the pretentious, music is nothing more than a barrier to insulate yourself from the outside world, even love is just another Hollywood lie. This nihilistic philosophy is the view of the nameless narrator of Matthew Selwyn's ****: *The anatomy of melancholy*.

Selwyn's teenage antihero spends his days pursuing women, alternating between the glamorous Lexi and geeky German goth Chloe, and pontificating about sexual desire in the internet age. **** is a portrait of a young man filled with seething contempt for everything around him: from school-run mothers to bookshop pretension, from education to feminism. The pinnacle of modern masculinity, he sees himself as part of a new breed of human who has learnt to see through the lies of the modern world through exposure to the desensitising effect of internet pornography and the interconnected superficiality of internet life.

Selwyn tells his tale as much through the absence of information as through its presence; large portions of the book pass before we learn about how our narrator makes his living, or about his family life. Fantasy sequences are expressed in a manner almost indistinguishable from

fact, and the sequence and timing of the events in the book is left ambiguous. Key questions about his life go unaddressed, and important events are described without ever explicitly showing us the aftermath. Selwyn turns this Spartan approach to storytelling into a form of artful misdirection, which leads us to one conclusion before he reveals a different reality.

The issue of the character's mental health is barely addressed yet ever-present. The reader is left wondering what led Selwyn to his regular sessions with his therapist Annabel, and the narration in these parts are concerned mainly with his efforts to evade her attempts to understand him. However, his whole worldview comes from the grey area between depression and philosophy, where the absence of meaning he feels is a sign of insight rather than a symptom of his disease. **** is a well crafted book, a bleak yet thought-provoking portrayal of a character whose very superficiality leaves us eager to find out what horrors lie beneath the surface, and what reality he protects himself from with his elaborate fantasy life.

Rob Stirrups