

QLH-S02E02M: We Have Always Lived in the Castle

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SPEAKERS

Jessi Chartier, Jen Myers

J Jessi Chartier 00:04
Welcome to Quiet Little Horrors. Here we talk about the films that creep under your skin and take up residence in the dark.

J Jen Myers 00:17
Before we get started as a reminder, when we talk about movies, we need to talk about everything in the movie. So there will be spoilers involved. If you haven't seen the movie or want to refresh your memory before you listen, you can stop now and do that before coming back.

J Jessi Chartier 00:32
Welcome back to Quiet Little Horrors. Today we're going to do a mini episode where we're going to look at a film to either preview an upcoming episode, or where we look at something that's just fun for the heck of it. And this one we're going to be looking specifically at, we have always lived in the castle, the 2018 film by director Stacy Passon. Not quite sure how she pronounces it. But hey, Jen, how are you?

J Jen Myers 01:01
I'm doing good. How about you?

J Jessi Chartier 01:03
I'm doing great. Let's talk quickly about this film. So the film, if you haven't seen it is about two

sisters who lose their parents due to poisoning. And the youngest sister's a little quirky. And she's convinced that the town has basically convicted her older sister in their minds that she was the one who murdered their their parents. And because of all the circumstances, this younger sister slowly descends into madness as she tries to retain the family unit that was lost against the world that is against them. So let's talk a little bit about how this film fits into this podcast and why we're actually talking about this film as it relates to an upcoming episode. So Jen, you want to kind of connect the dots here of why this particular film?

J Jen Myers 01:50

Yeah, definitely. Well, as a preview, our next full episode is going to be on the film of *The Haunting*, which was taken from Shirley Jackson's book, *The Haunting of Hill House*. So we thought we would take a look at this film, which is taken from another of Shirley Jackson's novels which same title, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. And that gives us an opportunity to talk about Shirley Jackson, who is a, you know, kind of a big themes, not the right word, maybe a guiding principle for me, and wanting to do this podcast, the type of stories and the type of tone that I'm really drawn to in this type of film. But also, we could talk about adaptations of her work and what works and what maybe doesn't work quite so. Well.

J Jessi Chartier 02:34

Yeah. And this particular film is interesting. We really chose Shirley Jackson, as well as a whole hope back up there and talk about that is because Shirley Jackson really approaches a horror from a very domestic point of view, what is the domestic horror that is going on, it's very quiet, it's very unassuming until it is disruptive. So we decided to look at we have always lived in the castle, because it's a relatively new adaptation versus the haunting that is from the 60s that you'll hear in an upcoming episode. And this film, for me really fits into this quiet little podcast theme. Because the main character Merricat, has almost like a heightened sense of caricature and understanding of the world around her. Her sister is almost doll like her uncle is very almost magician like, and her cousin is very threatening, like, there's just a lot of caricature nature in here that makes the whole world feel just a little off kilter. And it really kind of highlights the story at least really highlights what happens when the safety net of a family unit or your expectations within a family unit start to be disrupted or disintegrated. But I gotta say, with Jen and I have talked about this in the past, this film really doesn't do it. For me, this is one of the first horror films that I think we're going to talk about on this cast that I don't know just didn't it didn't seem to do it deep enough, the the tone was will a little too quirky. The fear and the paranoia and the anxiety was really subdued and lost underneath the caricatures, at least for me. And I feel like it could have done something. I feel like it could have been something so much more creepy, and it became off almost as like a saccharin version of a Shirley Jackson, which is just weird. It just came off as like not really landing for me, but that was me. Jen, what do you think?

J Jen Myers 04:38

I'm actually really similar on this and I think that's one of the reasons we were interested in doing kind of these smaller episodes because we typically do films that you know, we either love or like a lot. And this is the first time this is a film. Yeah, it kind of rings a little hollow and

I'm right with you. And I think that we I know we both have read the book So we're probably coming to it with a lot of high expectations. Kind of full disclosure there. I know I do. I know I'm coming in with a really high bar for this because I love Shirley Jackson and I love this novel. And so yeah, there is a high bar there, but it didn't it didn't hit it for me either. I think that the way you described it as kind of a a saccharin, surely Jackson, or, or, if nothing else, just kind of like it's a little toothless. It just doesn't have Yeah, like you said, the same depth or the same kind of horror literally underneath it, that I would have expected for the story. So I'm the same way as you it's a little bit odd, though. Because when I think about the, a lot of the individual elements of this movie, like the performances, I think, are really good. I like a lot of the there's nothing particularly wrong with the story. Obviously, we like the story in general, but the way it's done in the movie, kind of makes sense that there's not one thing I can point to and be like, Oh, that's wrong. I don't like that. That didn't work. There's lots of things individually I like, but it just doesn't add up to what I was hoping out of a movie like this.

J

Jessi Chartier 06:08

Yeah, I agree, I were I really would love to see. Stacey Passon really, almost do a director's cut of it, where she goes back and treats it a little bit more pushes it a little bit more into that suspense and uncomfotability paranoia, that anxiety inducing realm with just a little bit of editing. And I can't I can't even remember the composer and so I don't want to like throw him on or her under the bus because I don't remember if it was, if the music was pulling me in, in that regard, which, but I would want more of that type of stuff. Like, I would feel like it would just take a handful of just different lens like I don't think they would have to go back. And the casting was amazing. The costumes were beautiful. The cinematography was spot on. The dialogue was great. It was like, it was just I feel like they could have added heightened elements of paranoia throughout the whole thing. Because I mean, like all Shirley Jackson's there's a twist at the end, which is that the Merricat is actually the one who killed her parents. And to play up the paranoia of Merricat, having the town turn against her sister would have been like, I wanted more of that I wanted more of that sense that the world was out to get me and I wanted to buy into it. Because it's from Merricat's point of view. I wanted to like feel it, I wanted to believe it. I wanted to, you know, get a little bit more into it. And I feel like the it was hard to really empathize a ton that with Merricat, I felt she was more of like a caricature, like, I'll use that term a lot in this. Like, I felt like she was just a little too quirky. But I wanted her to be believable, you know. And I think that that's true of all Jack Shirley Jackson's main characters like you want them they come across in the books is so believable, and you descend into madness with them. And I don't feel like that that happened here. But again, it's just one interpretation. Yeah, I think

J

Jen Myers 08:22

you're onto something though. I felt the same way when it comes to Merricat and kind of know what the correct word is, is like seeing the film through her eyes or the story through her eyes? This is actually something I think is we'll get to this when we talk about the haunting, which I think is done really well with the main character of The Haunting. Eleanor, I think you are really with her. It through a lot of that. And I agree with you that I think there was a certain distance here with Merricat, that didn't work. And I think part of that might be because like you said, there's there's this reveal, towards the end that Merricat was actually the one who did the poisoning. And so I have this feeling that maybe that distance is built in there, so they don't tip

their hand. It's actually it kind of leads us into something else that I think of when I think of this movie is that it's really hard to do an unreliable narrator in film, especially when you have like that central character that you're supposed to have empathy with, and follow with and like, experience the story with them. But if they're not telling you the truth, like it's so much harder to pull that off and film that it is in a novel

J Jessi Chartier 09:28

I think it 100% It's one of the reasons that a lot of Agatha Christie's what was the novel she wrote where the main character was the murderer.

J Jen Myers 09:34

I don't know, actually, I'm not super familiar. I should be.

J Jessi Chartier 09:39

It was the novel that put her on the map as she wrote this, and it was like the doctor or the coroner, who was who turns out to be the murder, and he's the main character and so and it's a third person. No, it's first person, it's told first person. So but it works well in the novel. I agree, I think you can pull it really hard to do in film.

J Jen Myers 10:03

I mean, it's still kind of difficult to do it novels, right? Not everybody can do that. Right. And I think there's a little bit of a, it's become a more popular thing. But yeah, films, it's so much harder, because you see everything you're kind of in this omniscient point of view, and you see much more, it's hard to harder to determine what the audience knows and what they don't know what they see and what they don't see that sort of thing. And so I think that in a way that that kind of hurts the the connection that you build with Merricat, because it's kind of protecting that secret. But the thing is, because you have that distance, or remember when they finally reveal that it almost feels like it feels it falls a little flat. Because it for me, at least and I knew it and I still maybe that maybe it fell flat for that. But it kind of when you find out oh, it was actually Merricat that did this and actually it her constants actually is tried for this and acquitted. Like she goes through a trial and she's acquitted. And then you also realize that Constance always knew it was her and she's she went through all of that, and she's willing to deal with the whole town for Merricat's sake, which kind of makes Merricat's behavior, not not to I mean, the poisoning was pretty bad. But I mean, even just kind of the stuff that she does to keep Constance to herself and kind of scare their cousin Charles away. And all of that is even more monstrous, because she's kind of the agent of that, but you don't I don't feel like I got that monstrous feeling in the film.

J Jessi Chartier 11:32

No, I didn't either. And I feel like converting a Shirley Jackson story to film is really hard. It's very, so I tend to think of it's kind of similar to a lot of Stephen King, stuff like that, when you're

very, so I tend to think of it's kind of similar to a lot of Stephen King, stuff like that, when you're talking and you're writing in the the horror medium of books, you just can do. You can just manipulate imagination and perspective in a way that's limited. In film, not impossible, but limited. And in order to do it really well, you have to be willing to take risks and play with the medium of film, in order to make that happen. And that's not something a whole lot of studios want to do. Like they don't want to take a whole lot of risks. So like, I tend to think of something that worked really well. That was almost kind of experimental at the time was momento like this really off the wall story structure. That was not really seen that I'm sure had a lot of production questions like people going, Wait, why, how, the audience is too dumb, they're never going to follow it. Like I'm sure that there's just a lot of conversation like that. And I feel the same way with the haunting, too. It's, it reminds me of like The Yellow Wallpaper. Like when you have scenes at the end of movies where people melt away and lose themselves. And you aren't sure if they actually melted away or if there's just going insane as a reader, like how do you do that in film? Like how do you shoot that's really hard to do, if not impossible.

J Jen Myers 13:11

I think that as we're talking about how we are kind of disappointing in this we're also constantly reaffirming that, like, this is a really difficult thing to do. And there's a high bar here for this film. So like, you know, I think that's one of the reasons like we don't hate this film. We're just like wished it had been a little bit just gone a little bit farther to maybe reach that because it is a difficult thing that we're doing and Shirley Jackson I think too is such a master literally have this subtle psychological horror, you know, and it's it's very subtle and just fine tuned. And that that's that creates another high bar where it's just like how do you get that across in a film in a way that you are still saying this is exactly what it is? Which it or you you deliberately leave this ambiguity which sounds kind of weird, but there is a way to do that. And I think I just keep coming back to like well, The Haunting I feel like does do this. I do think it's successful, which I think is kind of part of the high bar is like well we know it is possible because this film does it when the story I think is a little bit more complicated. It's a little more complex. Overall I don't think it quite hit the same mark that The Haunting was able to

J Jessi Chartier 14:30

Oh yeah, The Haunting just nailed it. And it was the 60s the one that we're going to be talking about here. In the next episode.

J Jen Myers 14:37

We should clarify that will clarify that a lot before. Episode Yeah,

J Jessi Chartier 14:42

really did a nice job. But it really did a beautiful job of creating this suspense of really striking the the fear of gender stereotypes expectations of where you are in the life the pressure and pressure Question from societal norms, the desire to escape those, the madness that comes with it. And all of the terrifying nature that happens in that transition. Like it's just a beautiful,

beautiful journey. I'm excited to talk about that. So we should close this out and leave it there so that you listeners got to join us for the haunting because you got to hear how they did it. And they did it real well. So I'm excited to talk about that. Sounds good. We're going to leave you on a cliff note my friends. So tune in to our next episode, where we talk about the haunting, which is a film from the 60s that is based on the Shirley Jackson story and book. We are looking forward to exploring the corners of that dark house with you. Thanks for joining us. We'll see you later.