

Rosemary's Baby

film review

Thomas Haroldson

1968

a review of

"Rosemary's Baby" directed by Roman Polanski

It's not everyday that one comes across a novel in which Satan rapes a New York housewife and forces her to bear him an heir. In fact, two and a half million readers found the story so intriguing that they turned *Rosemary's Baby* into an overnight success.

And now, as if to prove that nothing succeeds like success, Ira Levin's bestseller has been made into a movie that promises to be the most popular motion picture of the year.

However, unlike many films that become super box office attractions, "*Rosemary's Baby*" fully deserves to be a hit. Despite a few minor lapses, it is without question one of the best cinematic novels ever produced.

The director, Roman Polanski, by suppressing his own artistic ego, has managed to bring Levin's novel to the screen virtually intact. The movie is nothing less than a letter-perfect facsimile of the book—the words, the characters, the scenes are reproduced exactly as the author conceived them.

Polanski, who also directed "*Knife in the Water*" and "*The Vampire Killers*," did not leave out a single detail. Some critics, who obviously did not read the novel, failed to understand what he was attempting to do. They did not realize, that for all practical purposes, the film IS the book.

For example, Gene Youngblood asked naively: "Does (Polanski) really need to move his camera ostentatiously from the girl to her reflection in a toaster for a weird effect?"

The answer, of course, is yes. Levin wrote: "She looked at herself in the side of the toaster, where her moving reflection had caught her eye." If a director sets out, as Polanski did, to flawlessly recreate someone else's work, an effect such as this cannot be overlooked.

This is not to say, however, that everything in the book is worth reproducing. In fact, Levin's writing is generally so poor that it was only through some mysterious process that Polanski was able to use any of it.

At first glance the original work seems to be nothing more than a second-rate thriller-chiller turned out by a tired hack. But it does have one thing on its side—its suspenseful plot is absolutely irresistible. Many people (and I'm one of them) have literally stayed up all night in order to find out how the story ends.

But after finishing the book (or seeing the movie) a certain uneasiness sets in. One begins to realize that despite its compelling plot there is something seriously wrong with the work.

For one thing, it is quite obvious that Levin did not complete the book he started out to write. If he had, the Catholic Church would have probably burned him at the stake.

The original premise of the novel called for a bitter attack on the Church for being, in reality, an agency of the Devil. And although Levin backs off about half way through, it is clear what he had in mind.

It is more than a coincidence that Rosemary (the Virgin Mary?) is an ex-Catholic. It is no accident that she dreams of nuns and the Catholic Kennedy family. It is not mere chance that she is raped by Satan on the very day

that Pope Paul visits New York. Nor is it mere chance that the Gothic apartment building in which the rape takes place is owned by the Catholic Church.

Needless to say, this is pretty heavy stuff. I suspect that Levin lost his nerve when he realized that he was unable to handle such serious material. He finally gets off the hook by replacing the Catholics with a coven of relatively harmless old witches.

By thus shifting the story to a neutral supernatural position he successfully avoids offending the Church, but in doing so he turns the remainder of the book into a theological absurdity, Levin's profound conclusion is that God (that old man with the long white beard) is dead, and that Satan (the cat in the long red underwear) is very much alive. It's too bad that Levin took *Time* magazine literally.

But the film, like the book, is thoroughly enjoyable if you don't think about it too much. The tight, suspenseful screen play, which was written by Polanski, functions beautifully (especially if you haven't read the book), and the acting couldn't be much better. The color photography is warm and imaginative and handled with great care. The background music is good. The lighting is great. In short, no matter how you look at it, "Rosemary's Baby" is a first-rate flick.

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