

Gone Baby Gone: a moral mystery

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Directed by Ben Affleck, screenplay by Affleck and Aaron Stockard, based on the novel by Dennis Lehane

Gone Baby Gone is the directorial debut of actor and Academy Award-winning screenwriter Ben Affleck. It also marks the first time the actor has returned to screenwriting since 1997's *Good Will Hunting*, a considerable success. Affleck co-wrote the current film with Aaron Stockard. After a downturn in his career, the actor-director seems intent on proving his seriousness.

Gone Baby Gone is a kidnapping thriller set in the working class neighborhoods of Boston. It follows, unhappily, in the footsteps of two other recent crime films set in Boston, *Mystic River* and *The Departed*. As in those other works, the filmmakers in this case tend to depict their popular characters as irredeemably ugly and backward, their neighborhoods one great criminal cesspool in which everyone seems guilty of something ugly.

Both *Gone Baby Gone* and *Mystic River* are adaptations of crime novels by best-selling author Dennis Lehane whose writing is typically hard-boiled...to the point of being overcooked. For some reason, his *Gone Baby Gone* appears to be a favorite of Affleck's.

As the film begins, we learn that a little girl, Amanda McCready, has gone missing. Her aunt and uncle hire private investigators Patrick Kenzie (Casey Affleck) and Angie Gennaro (Michelle Monaghan) to "augment" the police investigation into her disappearance. They're told that the missing girl's mother, Helene McCready (Amy Ryan), apparently left her daughter home alone while she went to a neighbor's apartment to watch television, and when she came home the girl was gone.

Helene McCready is presented as a drug-addicted lowlife who curses every other word and, to finish off the stereotype, watches the tabloidesque *Jerry Springer*

Show even while her child is missing. It must be said that McCready is among the most crudely drawn characters to appear on screen in recent memory. She is so repulsive that later attempts, mostly half-hearted, to treat her more humanely make little impression on the viewer. In general, one is invited to either laugh at or despise the character.

As the private detectives begin their investigation, they will be assisted by two police detectives, Remy Bressant (Ed Harris) and Nick Poole (John Ashton), assigned to them reluctantly by police captain and local hero Jack Doyle (Morgan Freeman). Together, the team will begin to uncover a criminal enterprise that may be behind the little girl's disappearance.

They are informed that Helene McCready and her boyfriend stole a large sum of money from a drug kingpin. The kidnapping may have been an attempt by the latter to pressure the couple into giving the cash back. There is an unseemly moment when the detectives discover the boyfriend's body after he's been tortured and murdered; they joke over the corpse about the gruesome interrogation that must have taken place. "I guess they didn't believe him," says one detective.

As the investigation proceeds further, the team of Patrick, Angie, Bressant and Poole will set up a meeting with the druglord, described, crudely again, as "a violent, sociopathic Haitian criminal." The planned exchange of the money for the girl will go badly. People will die, the girl will be lost. It is a disastrous rescue attempt that will haunt Patrick Kenzie, who becomes demoralized and obsessed with the case.

From this point onward, the film grows even darker. Another child goes missing. Patrick and Detective Bressant will search for him in the home of suspects who had come to their attention during the Amanda McCready case. The suspects are simply monstrous. The new missing child is found murdered in the room

of a “pedophile.”

At this point, it is worth noting that pedophilia is a recurring theme in Lehane’s work, and his fictional pedophiles tend to be remarkably violent criminals, which, in reality, is hardly ever the case. But neither Lehane nor the filmmakers concern themselves a great deal with reality. A pedophile is simply another monster to add to their rogues’ gallery of “bad guys,” this time with more salacious detail. A cheap and easy misanthropy is one of the default settings of contemporary filmmakers of a certain school.

The episode with the pedophile ends violently. Later, in conversation, Bressant and Patrick discuss the incident. Detective Bressant explains he once planted drugs on a man who had kept and abused a child in the back room of a crack den. Bressant is convinced he did the right thing in framing the man and defends his actions with passion. Patrick is less sure. He would act differently if he had it do over again. This bizarre conversation holds no dramatic weight, in any event, thanks to the lengths the filmmakers have gone to make the victim of Patrick’s violence such a grotesque figure.

As time goes on, Patrick, still obsessed with the McCready case, will uncover more clues in the disappearance of Amanda that lead him to believe she may not be dead. From here, the film approaches its conclusion with an extended series of plot twists; one can hardly keep up. With so many random twists and turns, the viewer simply loses interest.

There are no clues or intimations in the earlier section of the film that would lead one to guess at its ultimate direction. The film is essentially not unlike those “surprise ending” movies that were very popular until recently (one thinks of *The Sixth Sense*, *The Others*, *Identity*, *Secret Window*, *Hide and Seek*, etc.), films in which variations on the “It was all a dream” ending are tacked onto the end of a story, redefining everything that came before them.

What emerges finally, from the half-coherent tricks of the narrative, is that the little girl was never in the hands of the druglord. It was all a set-up.

And this presents the film’s final question to the audience. Patrick is left with the decision to alert the authorities to the true facts or not. The film invites its viewers to make up their own minds.

What is one to make of all this? The child of Helene

McCready, for whom the filmmakers have little or no compassion, was kidnapped in an elaborate conspiracy involving a high-ranking official. In the course of that conspiracy, a number of people were murdered. McCready, for her part, was simply poor, drug-addicted and neglectful. Patrick struggles for a long time, not knowing what to do. That the moral compass tasked with doing the right thing is none other than a detective-for-hire who murdered an individual in cold blood appears to escape the filmmakers.

Affleck may be trying to say something about poverty and particularly children in poverty—there are officially 12.8 million in the US—but if that’s the case, the director has confused the entire issue. He’s made a film with some extremely ugly and disturbing elements.

One thinks, finally, of Gus Van Sant’s *Good Will Hunting*, co-written by Affleck and Matt Damon. That film adopted a different attitude toward the working class people and places of Boston. It was an overrated work, to be sure, but the story, as limited as it was, contained characters for whom the writers clearly had feeling and even affection. There was, if nothing else, the sense there was unfulfilled potential, unexpressed genius lying in those neighborhoods. There was certainly some humanity. In Affleck’s latest work, that’s all gone.

Whether this coldness reflects Affleck’s real sentiments or whether he is merely attempting to impress hardly matters in the end.



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