

Tell No One: An undying love unproven

David Walsh
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Directed by Guillaume Canet, written by Canet and Philippe Lefebvre, based on the novel by Harlan Coben

Tell No One (*Ne le dis à personne*) is a French-made thriller based on the 2001 novel by American author Harlan Coben.

Tragedy and mystery surround Alex Beck (François Cluzet), whose wife Margot (Marie-Josée Croze) is abducted and murdered in the film's prologue. Eight years later, Beck, a successful pediatrician, remains obsessed with his dead wife. The discovery of two corpses, long buried, prompts the police to re-open Margot's murder, which was somewhat conveniently pinned on a serial killer.

Simultaneously, Alex begins receiving e-mails suggesting that his deceased wife is still alive. They conclude with the urgent instruction, "Tell no one." Beck is not the only one interested in the dead woman. A malevolent man-woman team is also on the hunt, and painfully savages anyone in the way.

Alex soon finds himself a suspect for two murders and in full flight across Paris from the police. In desperation, he turns for assistance to a small-time gangster whose son he correctly diagnosed years before. He also launches his own investigation into the facts of his wife's tragic death.

Meanwhile, a police detective, Eric Levkowitz (François Berléand), is having doubts about Beck's guilt and raises questions about some of the puzzling aspects of Margot's abduction and killing.

Various twists and turns occur. The truth that ultimately emerges implicates some powerful people, and their accomplices, in corruption and lethal crime.

The situation is intriguing. A woman, whose corpse was identified by her father, a policeman (André Dussolier)—Alex was in a coma for three days—and later cremated, apparently reappears.

Often, these days, in thrillers, authors or screenwriters seem to compete with one another in setting out the

most extravagant premises, but falter when it comes to providing backgrounds or explanations to match the spectacular goings-on. Such books or films are "frontloaded," impressive to begin with, but weak and disappointing in the end. The emphasis is not on the development of characters, relationships or milieus, but on the concoction of a clever or attention-grabbing conceit.

In *Tell No One*, the author and, following him fairly closely, the filmmaker have made a serious effort to recount a credible sequence of events. Nonetheless, there is a psychological implausibility at the heart of the story that can't be overcome. The latter can't be discussed directly without giving the plot away, but it involves the nature of the central love relationship. Some of the principal plot contrivances occur at the expense of psychological reality. Here too, unfortunately, the creators have largely worked backward from a clever notion.

As noted, director Guillaume Canet (known primarily an actor) follows the general outlines of Harlan Coben's thriller with some conscientiousness, taking into account that the setting is Paris (and the French countryside) and not New York (and a lake in eastern Pennsylvania). The film holds the spectator's interest for the most part, although it drags somewhat toward the end. This is a watchable movie.

Is that the most that can be said? Yes, I think so. Canet is working from essentially mediocre material, and he doesn't really transcend it. He aspires to be faithful to the original work, and he succeeds, for better or worse.

Coben (born 1962) is an adequate, but uninspired thriller writer, albeit with an obvious flair for the unexpected. *Tell No One* has too many twists and turns, although it must be said that the very final one, eliminated by the filmmakers, makes the events somewhat more psychologically believable.

His prose tends toward the familiar, comfortable and trite. Coben indulges in similes, “The tires bore down, kicking up dust like an Arabian stampede,” for example, or “a neckline that plunged like Black Monday,” which remind the reader that numerous generations separate him from Raymond Chandler, or even Ross Macdonald. This is fiction of the decidedly “softboiled” variety.

The novel, which is carefully calibrated and sanitized in its ethnic and cultural politics (a brassy lesbian confidante, a “streetwise” black rescuer), is told from the point of view of a middle class professional who involuntarily descends into the seamier depths of New York. Unlike Chandler and Macdonald (and others), who were impelled to expose some unpleasant truths about American life, implicitly criticizing the status quo, Coben has his character, like Canet’s, take the world entirely as given. He may regard his surroundings with disgust or amusement, but they are utterly fixed and unmoving. Beck’s only interest, once he’s sorted out the mystery, lies in getting back to his normal, suburban life as quickly as possible.

Too many characters and settings too thinly drawn. Again, this is typical of much modern popular writing and filmmaking. Inevitably, the author resorts to a kind of shorthand, to cliché, to carry the events forward. The filmed version follows suit.

Along these general lines, the chief weakness of the book and film is that both posit a fierce, enduring passion, which supposedly survives the grave, but fail to establish it emotionally. In Canet’s film, a few images of Alex and Margot as childhood sweethearts, along with several flashbacks from their married life, do not add up to a dramatically convincing motive for Alex’s extreme and relentless behavior. Croze is appealing, but her presence is relatively slight.

An assertion of obsessive feelings in a novel or film doesn’t create their reality, any more than a declaration of love in real life is sufficient without some proof of the depth of one’s ardor. The audience member is entitled to ask, “Why should we take your word for it?”

Canet’s actors make a sincere effort, sometimes too much of an effort, to compensate for the emotional truth that’s missing, especially Cluzet, but that side of the story is largely unaffecteding.

This too is typical of many contemporary films. Whether out of a “post-modern” matter-of-factness, the

attention-retaining requirements of the “action” genre or simply a lack of talent for creating genuine emotions, writers and directors rarely develop relationships with depth and texture. It’s part of a general shallowness—filmmaking by individuals who have not led important lives, but, for the most part, merely have careers.



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