

The Woman in the Window: Unable to leave her house, she sees a crime

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Directed by Joe Wright; written by Traci Letts, based on the novel by A.J. Finn

The Woman in the Window is a psychological thriller directed by British filmmaker Joe Wright (*Atonement*, *Hanna*, *Anna Karenina*) and available on Netflix. It is an adaptation of a popular 2018 novel with the same title by A.J. Finn.

Anna Fox (Amy Adams), an alcoholic child psychologist, suffers from agoraphobia. She is unable to leave her Manhattan brownstone. Because of her emotional struggles, her husband Ed (Anthony Mackie) has custody of their daughter. Anna speaks to the two of them every day by phone.

Through her front windows, she begins to pay attention to the Russells, a family that has moved in across the street. Jane Russell (Julianne Moore) visits Anna one evening, and they drink wine and play cards. Anna also befriends Ethan Russell (Fred Hechinger), Jane's troubled teenage son.

One night Anna watches in horror as someone stabs Jane in the Russell's house. She reports the crime to the police, but when two officers show up they tell her that everything is fine at the Russells. Moreover, Alastair Russell (Gary Oldman), a wealthy businessman, appears with someone he introduces as his wife "Jane" (Jennifer Jason Leigh), not the woman that Anna met.

Subsequently, Anna finds an earring that belonged to the first "Jane" beside her basement tenant's bedside and receives an email containing a photo of herself asleep. She summons the cops again, but very painful facts about her life and situation then emerge. It may well be that she has hallucinated a great deal of this. Further surprises and shocks lie in store.

Wright's film is mildly entertaining. It holds one's interest for the most part. Adams, Oldman, Moore,

Mackie, Leigh and Traci Letts (who plays Anna's psychiatrist and wrote the screenplay) all do their best.

The filmmakers strain to create a mood of tension, instability and, at times, near hysteria. Adams' character has been unmoored by trauma. With the assistance of pills and alcohol, she has a difficult time determining what is real. No one here helps her very much. The neighbors are disturbing, her psychiatrist is not terribly sympathetic, her downstairs tenant, out on parole, may himself be a menace to her. On Halloween, an apparently unruly mob of children hurl eggs at her house. We see nothing else of New York.

Wright told interviewers that he liked the idea "of the kind of minimalist constraints of making a film that is completely set in one house" and that he was interested in "the blurring between subjective and objective reality, truth and lies, and the lies we tell ourselves and how we create our own reality."

The Woman in the Window makes reference to a number of older works, including the 1944 film of the same title directed by Fritz Lang. We also see images on Anna's television screen from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and *Spellbound* (1945), Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944) and Delmer Daves' *Dark Passage* (1947). They provide hints at some of the eventual plot twists. However, sadly, all of these are much better films than the one under consideration.

Rear Window, of course, is the most obvious and direct influence. In that film, a news photographer, L.B. "Jeff" Jefferies (James Stewart), is also confined to his Manhattan dwelling, by a broken leg in his case. Jefferies idly, amusedly observes the goings-on in the apartment building across the courtyard, until he begins to suspect that one of his neighbors may have done away with his invalid wife.

Hitchcock's film develops a number of themes. Jefferies, possessed of both Hemingway-like, manly wanderlust and the voyeuristic curiosity of a Peeping Tom, is involved with a glamorous, wealthy woman, Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly), but resists committing himself to her. Lisa makes no secret of the fact she wants to marry him, a state of affairs that makes Jefferies extremely uneasy. At the same time, because of his injury, he is dependent on her and she becomes his proxy in the "investigation" of his possibly homicidal neighbor. In the end, Lisa proves to be as much of a daredevil as Jefferies himself, or perhaps outdoes him.

Across the way, Jefferies sees played out before his—and our—eyes (as on a series of movie or television screens) a number of variations, mostly failed or failing, on the love theme: a pair of newlyweds who run into problems, a nagging wife and apparently henpecked husband, a lonely single woman, a childless couple who pour their emotions into a relationship with their dog, and more.

Rear Window is the first of the four remarkable brilliantly colorful films Hitchcock, at the height of his artistic powers, directed in the 1950s, the others being *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958) and *North by Northwest* (1959). The first three featured Stewart, the last Cary Grant.

In each of the films, a successful professional (a photographer, a doctor, a former police detective and an advertising executive, respectively) ultimately finds himself entangled in a life-threatening sequence of events that breaks through and even demolishes the framework of everyday life. Middle-class Americans have never known such prosperity, and complacency, and yet the nightmarish keeps occurring.

In *Rear Window*, alongside its darker, more disturbing undercurrents, there is also a good deal of humor and an effort to represent urban life from different sides. A variety of personalities and situations passes before our eyes. As French director François Truffaut suggested to Alfred Hitchcock in their prolonged interview, "What Stewart sees from his window is not horrible but simply a display of human weaknesses and people in pursuit of happiness. Is that the way you look at it?" To which Hitchcock replied, "Definitely."

Filmmakers in the 1950s such as Hitchcock were still

concerned with the fate of broader layers. In Wright's film, as noted above, a facile malevolence hangs over the events. We assume the presence of a psychopath—there may well be a serial killer at work. (In *Rear Window*, the murderer proves to be pitiable, and half-mystified by Jefferies' spying.)

There is no life or liveliness on the streets in *The Woman in the Window*. The group of nasty trick-or-treaters is our only glimpse of reality beyond the limits of Anna's immediate circumstances or delusions. Unintentionally, the self-involvement of the affluent middle class and its distance from the rest of the population are captured in this regard. The result is something gloomy without any strong purpose.



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