Obsession: Love turns deadly

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Obsession, released earlier this year, is a horror film written and directed by Curry Barker. It tells the story of Bear (Michael Johnston), a young man who wishes his coworker Nikki (Inde Navarrette) would fall madly in love with him. His wish comes true, with unforeseen and violent consequences.

Bear is a shy and passive young man working in a music store alongside Nikki, Ian (Cooper Tomlinson) and Sarah (Megan Lawless). He is strongly infatuated with Nikki—whose confident and assertive nature contrasts with Bear's timidity—but he lacks the courage to express his feelings to her. He asks Ian for advice, who tells him confessions of love are "cringy" and he should simply wait for the right time to ask her on a date. However, a personal tragedy convinces Bear that time is short.

While looking for a gift for Nikki, Bear buys a "One Wish Willow" from a curiosity shop, a supposedly enchanted tree branch that promises to grant the user a single wish. He joins his coworkers on a night out, hoping for an opportunity to speak to Nikki alone. Opportunities present themselves, but Bear squanders them. Frustrated, Bear snaps the One Wish Willow in half, wishing that Nikki loved him "more than anyone in the world."

Nikki's demeanor changes instantly. She becomes consumed by a jealous, insecure obsession with Bear. Bear initially attempts to convince himself that her "love" for him (really, an unhealthy dependence and possessiveness) is genuine. However, Nikki's behavior becomes increasingly erratic. She covers his front door in tape to prevent him from leaving. She becomes violent toward Sarah, whom she sees as a rival for Bear's affection. She spirals into despair at the notion her intense feelings for Bear are not reciprocated. "Why don't you love me?" she screams in rage and agony.

The "real" Nikki, apparently trapped in some kind of inner prison, occasionally breaks through, pleading with Bear to kill her. Bear attempts to reverse the effects of his wish, but a One Wish Willow representative informs him that the wish can only be undone by Bear's death.

"Is her love real?" Bear asks.

"Just because you chose this for her doesn't make it less real," the representative replies, adding, "Sounds to me like you have a moral obligation to be there for her."

As one would guess, things end badly for everyone involved.

The film has been unexpectedly popular. Made on a budget of less than $1 million, it has grossed over $500 million at the global box office and is currently the seventh highest grossing film of the year in the US, and the 10th worldwide. It has been particularly popular among young people. According to box office analysts, 75 percent of the film's audience has been between 18 and 34 years of age.

Barker, who got his start making short films on YouTube and other social media platforms, has an instinct for pacing and disturbing imagery. While the plot sticks to familiar "be careful what you wish for" tropes, individual scenes contain surprising elements. Navarrette portrays Nikki as someone both monstrous and sympathetic. Her violent mood swings and emotional instability are more akin to a person experiencing a severe mental health crisis than to a character possessed by supernatural forces à la *The Exorcist*.

Johnston is generally convincing as an emotionally underdeveloped young man in over his head. Bear is not malicious, but he is self-centered and immature, as many are in this early stage of adulthood. The characters, with their various flaws and foibles, are more realistically drawn than in the typical modern horror film.

Still, the film's merits are slight. Like most contemporary horror films, it largely fixates on the gruesome and unpleasant. If it has hit a nerve with a substantial audience, it is because it taps into elements of a much larger crisis, particularly aspects afflicting the youth.

Millions of young people find themselves in situations like Bear's and Nikki's at the start of the film: working low-wage jobs, dreams and ambitions unfulfilled, feeling that precious time is being wasted. In such situations, it is not uncommon for one to attempt to find within intense

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romantic relationships the sense of purpose and feeling that one lacks elsewhere in life. Under certain circumstances, such an "obsession" (even to the point of emotional soap opera) can become a means of diverting one's attention from the social facts that are *truly* damaging or threatening one, a complicated structure of evasion.

It doesn't require supernatural forces for young couples to develop an unhealthy emotional dynamic in such cases, nor is it unusual for such arrangements to quickly deteriorate. Bear's self-centeredness only fuels Nikki's insecurity, while her constant need for closeness and reassurance drives him further away.

If one element of the film strikes a chord it is that both Bear and Nikki are ultimately victims of a larger force outside their immediate control. Of course, that force is neither supernatural nor ambiguous. The enormous social and economic pressures bearing down on the young generation affect, directly or indirectly, every aspect of their lives, including their love relationships.

Some figures help fill out the picture:

• A 2026 study published in *Community Mental Health Journal* found that, "Individuals in the lowest income group (earning <$25,000 annually) reported the highest prevalence of frequent loneliness (23.2 percent) and frequent perceived social isolation (30.3 percent). In contrast, those in the highest income group (earning ?$200,000) reported the lowest prevalence of both (4.9 percent and 9.8 percent)." Loneliness was most acutely experienced by young people aged 18-29 (23.3 percent).

• An article published in the *Journal of Wellbeing Economics* found that the number of young adults who report feelings of despair and mental ill-health has increased significantly since 2015, a trend largely driven by a sharp increase among young workers aged 18-22. A separate study in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* found that hourly workers with unpredictable work schedules faced a higher risk of divorce and relationship breakup.

• A 2026 survey by the Bank of Montreal found a sharp increase in the price of dating for young couples, with nearly half of respondents who were single saying that dating is "not financially worth it." For those in relationships, 58 percent said they were financially dependent on their partner, up from 40% a year ago. A 2026 survey of Gen Z and Millennial renters found that 42 percent of respondents chose to stay in relationships longer than desired due to high housing costs.

Many more such figures could be cited. Young workers face rising levels of ill-health and social despair and are increasingly denied the opportunity to form stable relationships. When they do enter relationships, they are increasingly unable to *leave* them, even if they are unhappy, or worse.

Notably, similar pressures impacted the filmmaking crew itself. The film's art director, Sally Choi, revealed on social media that she was paid a rate of $300 per day to work on the film, for a total of $6,761 (or roughly 0.00001 percent of the film's worldwide gross). Like many young film workers she was living paycheck-to-paycheck during filming. She described the production itself as being so grueling that "I kept losing weight, weighing 90 lbs during this production."

Barker seems to have tapped into all this by accident, or unconsciously. In interviews he speaks of his desire to build an *Obsession* franchise, with additional films or television series. Hollywood, always hungry for a "hot, new" source of profit, is eager to jump onboard. As the *Hollywood Reporter* noted, "*Obsession* filmmaker Curry Barker has become Hollywood's latest obsession… Coming off the eye-popping second weekend performance of his horror movie, where it defied the laws of gravity by making even more money than its first weekend, Barker is already fielding offers…According to sources, one studio is so hot to work with Barker and so believes in the YouTuber-turned-theatrical filmmaker, that it attempted to make a preemptive offer of $10 million for Barker's next original project, sight unseen." Be careful what you wish for, indeed.

The situation facing young people is not fixed or immutable. It is a prelude to an explosive growth of social opposition, already in its early stages in France, Spain, Germany, and elsewhere. There is a growing rebellion against a social order that cannot provide a future for young people or their loved ones. The struggle for the necessities of life, including, in the last analysis, the ability to form stable relationships, requires a conscious battle against the existing social order.



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