

Girls, on Film

Family Issues

NEAR DARK

Issue 31
Feb 2026

Uncle Buck

THROW
MOMMA
FROM THE
TRAIN

Polyester

Ordinary
people

TWINS

Three Men
and
a Baby

Parenthood

Hopelessly devoted to 80s movies

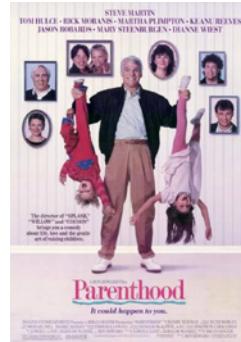
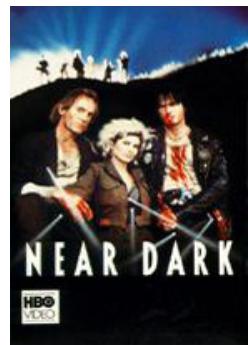


Parenthood (1989)

Girls, on Film *Family Issues*

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All in the Family...

Welcome to Issue 31 of *Girls, on Film*, the zine that is hopelessly devoted to 80s movies! In each issue, we spotlight eight films released between 1980 and 1989, all related to a particular theme. We explore every corner of the decade's cinema, from beloved blockbusters to oddball gems and everything in between, through essays that blend review, history, commentary, and personal reflection.

In this issue, we dive into 80s films about families, however you define them. (For family-friendly movies, see Issue 19). Not familiar with the selected titles? Peruse plot summaries below.

Ordinary People (1980) A family struggling with loss and grief tries to return to their normal lives.

Polyester (1981) John Waters settles into the mainstream with the Fishpaws, the happiest dysfunctional family in America!

Near Dark (1987) Their bloodlust contains calculating night moves and naughty, naughty fashion.

Three Men and the Baby (1987) Three freewheeling bachelors are forced to grow up—comically fast—when a baby is delivered to their apartment doorstep.

Throw Mama From the Train (1987) Danny DeVito turns Hitchcock into black comedy.

Twins (1988) Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito show off their height difference.

Parenthood (1989) "Hell, you need a license to catch a fish! But they'll let any butt-reaming asshole be a father."

Uncle Buck (1989) A blue-collar city dwelling uncle is called upon to watch his brother's kids in the suburbs.

About the Zine

Girls, on Film is an 80s movie zine founded in 2017. Get digital issues for free or purchase full-color prints. We also invite guest submissions, collaborations, and trades. Learn more on our website girlsonfilmzine.com, reach out by email (info@girlsonfilmzine.com), or follow on Instagram (@girlson80sfilm).

Co-Founders/Editors

Stephanie McDevitt's one big disappointment in life is that she wasn't old enough to fully appreciate popular clothing styles of the 1980s, as she was mostly attired in paisley sweatuits. A full-time editor and occasional freelancer, Stephanie looks nostalgically back on 80s films such as *Ernest Goes to Camp*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, and *Can't Buy Me Love* and wishes she could pull off the hairdos of Cindy Mancini and her friends.

Janene Scelza spent her teen years making zines and combing musty video stores and public libraries for all the 80s movies she could find. Janene's got plenty of favorites, but it's stylish indie films like *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Repo Man*, and *The Terminator* that she loves best.

Contributing Writers

Dr. Rhonda Baughman, a teacher and freelance writer, raised adolescent hell in the 80s, and the horror films of that era were her BFFs! She loves all 80s pop culture, but nothing spoke to her quite like *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama*, *Nightmare Sisters*, and *Reform School Girls*. She got a pink laminated Video Time Video membership at nine years old and she never looked back. Or forward, really; she still loves her VHS and VCR. And

let it be known, the scrunchie never died for Rhonda: she STILL wears one proudly!

Sebastian Gregory came of age in the fiery crucible of the 1980s. His parents were avid cinephiles who dragged him to every small, independent movie house in Houston and made sure he had a thorough education in film, which may explain his enduring affection for low-grade Italian westerns. He has been an editor, writer, musician, and actor while masquerading as an IT drone in Sector 17.

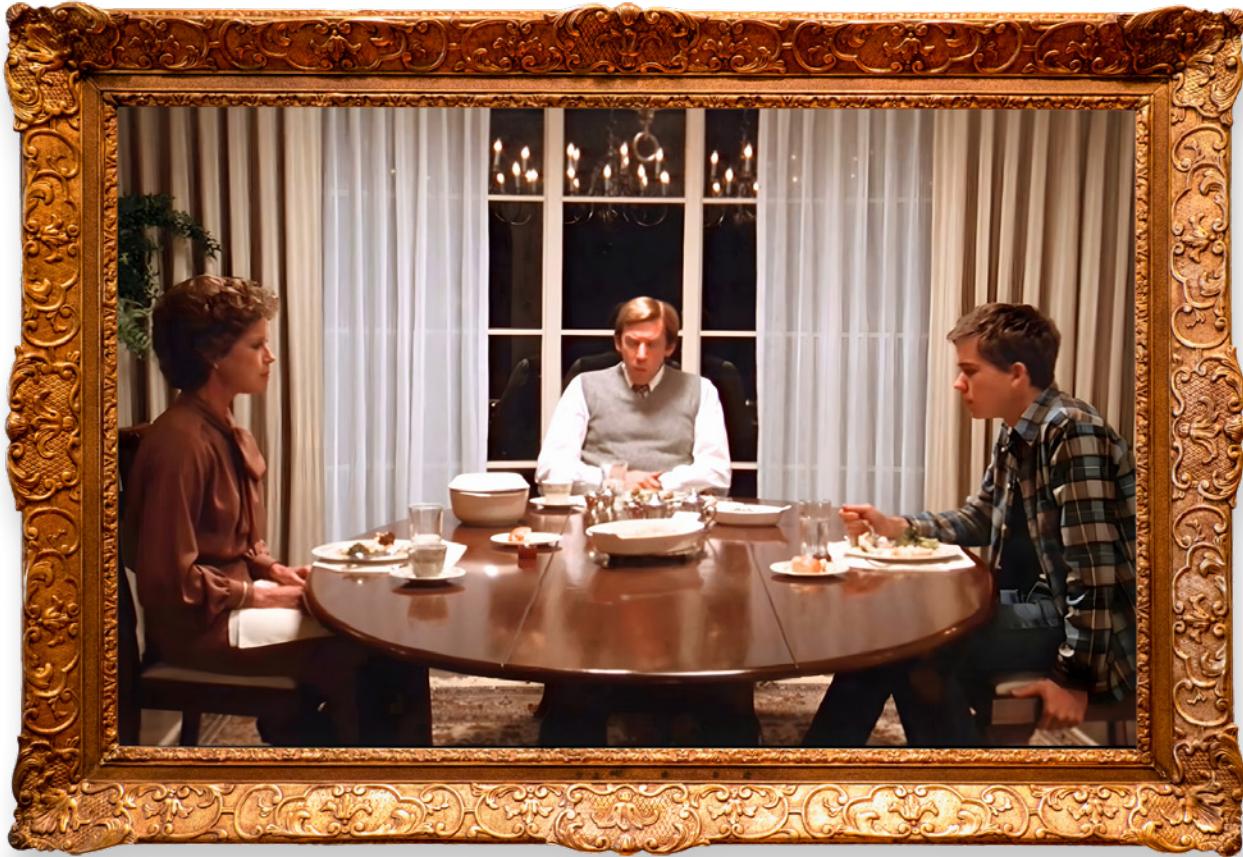
Jessica MacLeish is a Veronica, not a Heather. She's also writer, editor, and late 80s baby who loves watching, thinking about, talking about, and writing about movies.

Matt Scelza loves to dissect and analyze everything. He co-writes essays for the zine with his sister, Janene. He has also logged a lot of hours at the same video stores and public library film collections with Janene in search of odd and unusual titles. He's got too many favorites to name.

Tom Scelza prefers writing about movies he love instead of jawboning about it. After years of mulling over those "small" movies that came out during the '80s, Tom was invited to give it his all on movies he has loved forever. Movies should have more substance than car chases.

Guest Submissions

Love 80s movies and want to write for the zine? Send a short bio and writing samples to info@girlsonfilmzine.com.



It's Nobody's Fault *Ordinary People*

by: Stephanie McDevitt

Ordinary People is based on the 1976 novel of the same name by Judith Guest, and it's Robert Redford's directorial debut. This movie shows how death and grief can affect everyone, even those who seem to have perfect lives. Redford's storytelling about an ordinary family who is locked in an emotional standoff while dealing with tragic circumstances is nuanced and intelligent, and the movie won a host of awards. But please take note, this movie and this essay deal with death and suicide.

Ordinary People is about the Jarrett family who live in an upscale Chicago suburb. Calvin Jarret (Donald Sutherland) is a successful tax lawyer and Beth Jarrett (Mary Tyler Moore) is the perfect suburban wife who keeps a perfect home. They have two sons, Buck (Scott

Doebler) and Conrad (Timothy Hutton). When Buck dies in a sailing accident, their perfectly curated world tilts on its axis. The movie begins about four months after Conrad's attempt on his own life. He returns home after a stay in a psychiatric hospital, and he's trying to reintegrate into society. He goes to school, is on the swim team, sings in choir, and sees his friends. However, it's clear that Conrad is not okay. His parents have seemingly slipped back into their suburban social circle. They attend cocktail parties, go out with their friends, and plan their Christmas shopping. Calvin, however, notices that Conrad is struggling. So, Calvin encourages Conrad to contact a therapist that was recommended to him while he was in the hospital.



It's tough to sleep with so much on your mind.

Conrad eventually begins seeing Dr. Tyrone Berger (Judd Hirsch), and Conrad tells him that he was involved in the accident that killed his brother. They were sailing on the lake when a storm hit and capsized their boat. Conrad held on and survived, but Buck didn't. Conrad believes his mother hates him and she will never forgive him. He explains that after he cut his wrists, Beth was mad because they had to throw away the bathroom rug, because it had too much blood on it, and they had to regROUT the tile floor. Dr. Berger helps Conrad start to sift through his feelings and encourages him to try to reconnect with his parents and friends.

Conrad's friends just don't get it. He reaches out to Karen (Dinah Manoff) who was with him in the hospital, recovering from her own suicide attempt. When he asks her if she misses being in the psych ward where they could really talk and laugh about their situation, she tells him she is doing really well now and just wants to have the best Christmas and not think about the hospital. When he goes on a date with Jeannine (Elizabeth McGovern), she asks about his suicide attempt, and things get very awkward.

Calvin starts to make an effort to talk to Conrad more, but Beth refuses to engage. Every time Conrad tries to talk to her, even just about his grades, she pulls away. When they're trying to take a family picture, Calvin insists on a picture with just Beth and Conrad, but Beth doesn't want to take that picture. Beth thinks Calvin lets Conrad manipulate him, and Calvin can't understand why Beth isn't more concerned about Conrad's wellbeing. Then tension between the three of them



Attempting a night out with friends.

builds, and it's obvious the Jarrets will come to a breaking point before the end of the movie.

Ordinary People might be one of the few times that I think the movie is better than the book (along with *Stand By Me*). The book is also great, but it's hard to get a good picture of Beth because the book is written from both Conrad's and Calvin's point of view. So, as the chapters switch back and forth between them as narrators, we never get a first person account from Beth. I realize Guest structured the book that way intentionally to show that Beth is emotionally unavailable, and that while Conrad and Calvin take steps to heal and grow, Beth is totally unable to deal with her grief (or anything else for that matter).

The book also cannot capture the inability of the characters to communicate in the same way the movie can. As Vincent Canby said in his review, "It's difficult to write about people who cannot talk to each other because writing is itself a kind of talking. Mr. Redford's film demonstrates this lack of communication, the inability to express affection, in scenes of sometimes overwhelming pathos" [1]. Moore's Beth is so stoic and chilly, a far cry from her familiar television personas, that at first it's jarring. But Beth's silent refusal to address their issues with both Conrad and Calvin is much more powerful on screen than the page.

Redford said he decided to cast Moore as Beth when randomly saw her walking alone on the beach. He said, "At that time I had a place in Malibu, and it was winter and I was sitting there looking out on the beach. I saw this lonely figure all wrapped up and walking



Dr. Berger gets Conrad to talk.

slowly. The figure looked sad. On closer examination I saw it was Mary Tyler Moore—America's sweetheart. She was probably just cold, but the sadness hit me and stuck with me when I began casting" [2]. Moore said she was excited to take on a darker character while also noting, "This was Robert Redford. How could I say no?" [3].

While Moore as the perfectionist housewife was excellent, the rest of the cast also turned in stellar performances. Donald Sutherland's Calvin is caught between Beth's criticisms that he bends to Conrad's every whim and his genuine worry for his youngest son's mental health. Throughout the movie, Calvin slowly starts to realize that Beth doesn't seem to care about Conrad, and he has to grapple with whether he can still love her if she cannot love their surviving child. Sutherland beautifully navigates Calvin's slow revelations about Beth.

Timothy Hutton as Conrad was also great. *Ordinary People* was his first feature film, and he won both the Oscar and Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actor. Hutton is the lead actor in this movie, but Paramount decided to put him in for Supporting Actor because they didn't think he had a chance to beat Robert DeNiro, who was nominated and won for *Raging Bull* [4]. In addition to Hutton's nomination and win, the movie won Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay. Moore was nominated for Best Supporting Actress, but she lost to Sissy Spacek for *Coal Miner's Daughter*. Donald Sutherland was not nominated, and Entertainment Weekly claims it's one of the biggest Oscar snubs of all time [5].



Conrad and Cal hash it out.

Judd Hirsch was also nominated for Best Supporting Actor. He was mostly known for the sitcom *Taxi*, so, like Moore, this was a departure from his usual work. In addition to the accolades he got from Hollywood, Hirsh and the movie were praised by the psychiatric community for showing a therapist in a positive light at a time when psychiatry was often maligned in film [6]. In a *New York Times* article on this topic, Linda B. Martin said *Ordinary People* "was an unusually intimate and thoughtful film portrait. Robert Redford... brought together in very realistic terms the public and private suspicions surrounding psychiatry, the working through of fear and hostility, and the process of gaining insight through introspection" [7].

Martin wrote that article in 1981, and I wonder if the psychiatric community would still speak highly of this movie. In fact, I wonder how public audiences would relate. In 2020, reviewer Chris Vognar thought it might get criticism for flaunting privilege or for being too "WASP-y" [8], but those criticisms (which are fair but also reflect the time and setting of the original story) aren't relevant to the plight of the characters. Bad things happen in spite of their privilege, and their emotional problems are of their own making. So, even if the story was stripped of the perfect, white, suburban setting, it's still a movie about making a choice for or against introspection and healing, which I think most of us have to do at some point. *Ordinary People* is still a great movie, but it is very heavy. If you do decide to watch it, I recommend preparing yourself for emotional turbulence.



The Trash King Goes Mainstream **Polyester**

by: Sebastian Gregory

Buckle up as we peel back the layers of *Polyester*, the John Waters film that stank... mostly in a good way.

By the end of the 1970s, John Waters was an underground film sensation with a hardcore fanbase. The so-called “Trash Trilogy” (*Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), *Desperate Living* (1977)) secured his reputation as a provocative visual artist more than willing to defy convention and skewer cultural norms. The legendary ending of *Pink Flamingos* alone had generated a decade worth of urban legends and free publicity for Waters. What would he do to top the anarchic lewdness of his last three movies, how could he satisfy his

rabid fans? In a very John Waters way, he pivoted and produced his first big-budget, 35-millimeter camera, R-rated, mainstream movie.

At the tender age of 12, I attended the Houston premiere (accompanied by my parents) and it was a very festive atmosphere, with uber-fans in costume or drag psyched for the latest gross-out sensation. We knew we were in for something special because *Polyester* smelled. Inspired by William Castle’s 1950s B-movie classic *Scent of Mystery*, a movie that had accompanying smells blown in with the air-conditioning, *Polyester* came with an Odorama scratch-and-sniff card.



Grab your pearls, girls!

The viewer scratched the number on the card when prompted by a flashing number onscreen. This being a John Waters film, it was a given the scents wouldn't be pleasant. Airplane glue, dirty sneakers, farts, pizza, skunk... the gimmick worked to perfection when everyone in the theater scratched simultaneously, the scent rising through the theater. It was at times gross and yet really amusing, at least to a 12-year-old. I kept the card as a souvenir and for years you could still get the faint scent of a fart when you scratched it.

I was too young to understand the parts where the movie employed sophisticated subversive qualities allowing Waters to critique social norms, middle class values, hypocritical and fraudulent images, conventional families, and societal gender dichotomies and their representations in the cinema [1]. That bit went right over my head. What I do remember is a movie with a 300-pound drag queen playing a overwhelmed, drunk suburban housewife (with a keen sense of smell) dealing with a promiscuous daughter, a perverted son who stomps on women's feet, religious protestors, a cheating pornographer husband, a suicidal family dog, evil nuns, an abusive coke-snorting mother, and for some reason, 1950s teen icon Tab Hunter in a Corvette.

The plot, such as it is, follows some very predictable beats. *Polyester* was conceived as a parody of so-called women's films,



Style inspiration for the ZZ Top Legs video?

popular 1950s melodramas, particularly the work of director Douglas Sirk. John Waters asked cinematographer David Insley to use Douglas Sirk as a reference. Luckily Insley had just seen a Sirk retrospective, including *Imitation of Life* and *Written on the Wind* (1959). To get the overly melodramatic, overly stylized dramatic lighting of strong sunlight, hard light, and deep shadows, Insley worked with the lighting and set designers to make the interiors suitably garish and tacky. Luckily the house they had rented was already so tacky they didn't have to do too much [2].

For the first time Waters had a significant budget (\$300,000) from the newly formed New Line Cinemas. Shooting took a month in and around the suburbs of Baltimore. Waters could now afford things like actual movie cameras, a helicopter shot of the neighborhood, even an early steady camera setup. Michael Kamen, who was a relative unknown at the time, served as musical director, with songs by Debbie Harry, Tab Hunter and weirdly, Bill Murray [3].

The result was a significant upgrade from the usual John Waters style of guerrilla filmmaking, but it was also "frequently seen as his transition from the realm of anarchistic midnight movies to mainstream cinema...this shift was disappointing to many fans, some of whom even considered it betrayal" [4]. The hardcore fans might have been miffed but that didn't hurt the box office. *Polyester* was Waters' biggest hit



Cue up the Avalanches!

at the time. It made over a million dollars domestically and got generally favorable reviews (5), marking it a success and paving the way for John Waters to level up by the end of the 1980s.

That's not to say that *Polyester* is a great movie, at least, not by the usual standard. It's not even a good movie, no matter what the aggregate reviews claim. The acting quality is all over the place. Divine (a.k.a. Harris Glenn Milstead) is a hoot as beleaguered matriarch Francine Fishpaw. Mink Stole, Mary Vivian Pierce, and the other Dreamlanders (Waters' recurring actors) have smaller but still essential roles. Stiv Bators (of Dead Boys and Lords of the New Church fame) snarls through his scenes. Edith Massey, who plays eternally optimistic Cuddles, can barely remember her lines, but who cares? She's so genuine and sincere it's impossible not to like her. Only John Waters would have ever made her a star. (She passed away in 1984, shortly after the release of her final film, *Mutants in Paradise*).

Then there is the fabulous Tab Hunter, former 1950's screen sensation, whose career was revitalized by his role of Todd Tomorrow. According to Waters, he sent Hunter a script, and "he loved it, only he wanted to wear burgundy *Polyester*. I told him his leading lady would be played by a man. 'Who cares?!" he said. He was real nice to work with and just laughed about the whole thing. He got along very well with



Will you still love me, Tomorrow?

Divine and I was thrilled. I thought it was kind of a coup to get him" [6].

In the 1980s, Waters released two movies which couldn't have been more different. Seven years after the release of *Polyester*, Waters and Divine bring out *Hairspray* (1988) and Waters began to transition from one of the most reviled filmmakers of the 1970s to a beloved and celebrated cinematic icon. *Hairspray* was a film, then a Broadway play, then a movie based on the play with John Travolta doing the role Divine originated. His next two films starred Johnny Depp and then Kathleen Turner. John Waters, the queer icon, the outrageous provocateur has become—gasp!—normalized.

Maybe he's gone mainstream, but John Waters is still the archetypal trickster character: he reveals hypocrisy, raises awareness, and inspires fresh perspectives on a grand scale. Underneath the campy nihilism and perverse whimsy that pervades *Polyester*, Waters also gives us an almost sweetly sentimental family film with a redemptive story arc for the Fishpaws. Francine does get a happy ending, even if all her abusers have to accidentally die in quick succession at the end... a fitting end for the Reagan-era nuclear family unit.



Coming in hot! **Near Dark**

by: Dr. Rhonda Baughman

With 58 nominations and 47 award wins [1], superstar director Kathryn Bigelow, in her directorial debut no less, would create for horror fans a uniquely epic tale [2] of vampires who weren't pretty but damn they were hot; moreover, her team deftly mixed elements of arthouse and western, horror and thriller. Bigelow unleashed one of the top vampire films of the '80s, and that decade had some priceless gems.

But yes, for me, *Near Dark* (1987) comes out on top, surpassing other personal big budget favorites (like *The Hunger* (1983), *Fright Night* (1985) and its 1988 sequel, and *The Lost Boys* (1987)) as well as minor players like the low-budget, direct-to-video *Scream Queen*-laden menage a trois: *Transylvania Twist* (1989), *The*

Tomb (1985), and *Beverly Hills Vamp* (1989). *Near Dark* stands out from them all with its ensemble cast of ridiculously memorable performances and its gritty, purposefully lit texture. It represents a natural evolution of vampire cinema from the 1950s-70s, while also serving as a key predecessor to the more character-driven, stylistically ambitious vampire films that have emerged since 1990.

For the writing to work, for the landing to stick, the audience has got to like something about the antagonists, and *Dark*'s writers (Bigelow alongside Eric Red [3]) are so precise with their dialogue, they make sure I love those villains. Their casting choices bring their undead characters alive, creating



Ticket to ride.

a familial unit of five vamp villains and damn, I adore them all, including Lance Henriksen, Jeanette Goldstein, Bill Paxton, Joshua Miller, and Jenny Wright. Had I met these bloodsuckers in some hick town, I'd have asked to join their mad family to caravan around that desolate, sun-bleached swath of middle America with them. I'd have even offered to be wheelman.

Country boy Caleb Colton (played by a simultaneously baby-faced and chiseled Adrian Pasdar [4]) is beer-less, direction-less, and girl-less—and he's on the prowl. He makes eye-contact with May (Jenny Wright) [5] who, let's be honest, with her triple threat (adorable haircut, honied, spacey disposition, mysterious smile) and licking a small vanilla ice cream cone, she would have had most of us stumbling over our own feet, words, and morals to engage with her on any level.

May needs a ride home and Caleb is more than happy to help. He's immediately enamored, she seems vaguely half-interested; her demand that he stop the car and listen to the night should have been a red flag, but well, she is really hot. She startles Caleb's horse, indicating that animals just don't like her and she also soon panics at the approaching dawn, having lost track of time. Both gigantic red flags, but again she is hot. Caleb playfully demands a kiss before continuing her drive home. May obliges, on his neck, and then runs down a dusty road into the sunrise.

The vamp transition is fast, and with Caleb's truck a non-starter, he must walk home, across



Little Orphan Caleb finds a new family.

dusty fields. Soon, he begins to smoke. Not to worry though—May's family, in their wobbly mobile home with the duct tape and foil-covered windows, spot him stumbling along and pick him up, having to presumably pick up May as well. Thus, our first introduction to May's family is a doozy: dad-figure Jesse Hooker (Lance Henriksen), mom-figure Diamondback (Jeanette Goldstein), older-brother figure Severin (Bill Paxton), and younger brother figure Homer (Joshua Miller) all ready to rip Caleb apart—weapons of choice not just teeth but a butterfly knife, snub-nose revolver, and boot spur. May intervenes before they can "let the good time roll" (as Diamondback says) explaining "he's been bit but he ain't been bled." Hooker's wrath is evident while he pounds on the steering wheel, grudgingly saying, "He comes with us." It's not the last time May helps Caleb.

As the film rolls on, it's clear the vampires care for one another much as any decent human family would. Caleb's new vamp fam gives him a taste of what the night offers, meanwhile his real family, father Loy (Tim Thomerson) and sister Sarah (Marcie Leeds) [6] hit the road during the day, tracking him since the police are of little help. Eventually the two families face each other in a seedy motel showdown.

Mind you, *Dark* is a tornado of showdowns: from a honky tonk showdown to a bungalow hideaway showdown (that buys Caleb some time with his new vampire family as they test him to see if he can really be one of them) to the final street showdown between the vampires and Caleb (Homer kidnapped Sarah



Sparkly vampire boys get fucked.

after Caleb made a daring escape during the seedy motel showdown, when human and vampire families collide, allowing Loy the chance to perform a blood transfusion to save and re-humanize his son).

So yes, all these showdowns are magnificent in multiple ways, but it's in that honky tonk showdown of beautifully violent chaos that contains a line of dialogue that's lived in my head rent free, as the kids say, for the last 30 years at least. After the bartender croaks, "Whatchoo people want?" Hooker closes a door, leans on a payphone, and casually drawls, "Oh, just a few moments of your time—about the same duration as the rest of your life." It turns the scene full bonkers mode (although it was bonkers before). But bonkers, cinematically, is where I thrive.

If the Bigelow/Red writing duo, alongside Goldstein's menacing and ferocious Diamondback, Henriksen's calmly intimidating Hooker, Paxton's charming and volatile Severin [7], Miller's mad man-in-a-child's body, and Wright's sweet but deadly May are not enough to hold viewer devotion, then turn attention to dirty but fashionable vamp attire, music (both soundtrack and the Tangerine Dream score), and the overall cinematography [8] and smoking/burning skin FX that shoved *Near Dark* over-the-top and solidified fan status. No matter how you look at it, it's a blended genre masterpiece and holds the legacy torch high for moral ambiguity and intimate familial dynamics. Furthermore, the film's positive ending ensures it needs no reboot, remake, or sequel; it's canon and cannot be replicated.



Trial by fire.

Near Dark itself represents both a culmination of decades of evolving vampire lore and tropes and a boldly gorgeous break from its 1980s contemporaries. I appreciate all vampire cinema efforts [9], but for me, the '50s films felt like a lovely, but endless *Hammer* parade, Gothic tendencies meet Cold War anxieties. The '60s and '70s shift in tone and style, finally offering experimentation, more international contributions, and the films get a little darker, a little more psychologically bent, and broader social themes (like addiction, alienation, counterculture, and overt sexuality) increasingly entangle with the actual vampire mythology.

No doubt in my mind all three decades' efforts led us right to *Dark*, with *Dark* in turn paving the way for 90s entries like *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), 00s offerings like *Let the Right One In* (2008), and my two recent 10s favorites *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). *Near Dark* is not only a cult classic but a pivotal turning point in the cinematic evolution of the vampire myth within its decade. The 80s brought in comedy, the MTV-style aesthetics and bangin' soundtracks; *Near Dark* emerged within this boom but diverged sharply in tone: less camp and more grounded, and confidently creating a starkly character-driven plot with emotional depth and nuance. Its violence is realistic (and gross at times) but not overly gory and the lasting nomadic outlaw impact—stylistic, thematic, and performative—on vampire cinema for three subsequent decades shoots the moon, winning so many fanged predator-worshipping hearts.



We Were Babies Once **Three Men and a Baby**

by: Jessica MacLeish

There's something strangely poetic to me that this film—which I remember watching and enjoying at a family friend's house as a kid—made its theater debut just a few weeks after I made my own debut in this world. Yes, I'm talking about being born. Maybe I've just got babies on the brain, and really, after spending the evening revisiting this comedic-yet-touching farce from 1987, who could blame me?

Three Men and a Baby, based on the 1985 French film *Trois Hommes et un couffin* [1] (which means “cradle,” not “coffin,” despite how it looks, for you non-Francophiles out there), hit American theaters in November 1987 and made \$10.3 million in its first weekend [2]. The film features the 1980s power-house trio of Ted Danson, Steve Guttenberg,

and Tom “Magnum P.I.” Selleck as the titular “three men.” We’ll get to that titular “baby” in a moment, but first, a few words on these “three men.” Jack (Danson) is an actor looking for his big break, worrying that he’s overexposed in TV commercials, and hoping the TV movie he’s about to shoot in Turkey will be just the thing. Peter (Selleck) is a successful architect who boasts a love of basketball, Tom Selleck’s mustache, and Tom Selleck’s pants bulge (um, just Google it). Michael (Guttenberg) is a painter/cartoonist with a signature comic strip character—a tiger named Johnny Cool—to his name.

These three men are playboy roommates sharing an unbelievably beautiful bachelor pad on what appears to be Central Park West in Manhattan (that glass atrium hallway greenhouse



What would J.C. Watt do?

thing by the kitchen? IN their apartment? Make it make sense!). Well, Jack is a playboy, Peter is halfway a playboy with an on-again, off-again, non-exclusive girlfriend named Rebecca (Margaret Colin), and Michael...well, Michael is trying, but it seems like he is just as likely to convince a woman to get back together with her ex as he is to get her into his (absolutely insane-looking; is that a...sleigh?) bed. These three men, they're havin' fun and they're lovin' life. Fun fact: Guttenberg and Selleck took Danson (who was bigtime/longtime married) out bar hopping before filming began so that the three actors could get into the groove of their best bud, out-on-the-town, swingin' bachelor characters [3].

Anyway, they're havin' fun, they're lovin' life, they're...about to grow up, fast. As Janet Maslin said in her *New York Times* review of the movie in 1987, "this story is about four babies, not just one" [4]. Here's where the actual baby comes in, though: the morning after Peter's big birthday bash (and shortly after Jack leaves for Turkey for 10 weeks), Peter returns home from a jog to find a baby girl in a frilly Moses basket on the bachelor pad's doorstep.

After a few moments of both he and Michael thinking the other is pulling a prank, they discover the note, which identifies the baby as Mary, her father as Jack, and her mother as Sylvia, who sounds like she might be having some kind of postpartum depression breakdown. For real, I am worried about Sylvia, but I am the only one, because Peter and Michael are (perhaps understandably) more bewildered, overwhelmed, and confused by the fact that they now have a baby of indeterminate



No bunk in the trunk.

age to take care of, while also wondering if this is the package Jack told them was going to be delivered that morning? (It is not. That package is heroin, because one of Jack's director friends is, unbeknownst to Jack, a drug mule/dealer calling in a secretive favor.)

What follows is some good ol' fashioned new parent panic (relatable, and I'm almost 4 years removed from this particular flavor of panic myself). Also a good ol' fashioned mix-up with menacing drug dealers and a narcotics detective (played by Philip Bosco). Hijinks ensue, of course—in fact, I think this movie might be the reason a phrase like "hijinks ensue" exists at all. The heroin mix-up is somewhat stressful—especially when the lead drug dealer almost puts Mary in the trunk since he doesn't have a car seat in his convertible?!, and when the apartment is ransacked, poor babysitter Mrs. Hathaway tied up, and Mary hidden in a closet—but is handled rather tidily, all things considered. The real tension and thus emotional core and payoff of the movie is the appearance of Mary and these guys growing to love her (and growing up in the process).

The guys figuring out how to parent Baby Mary is both extremely stressful and incredibly charming. There's poop. There's confusion around teething, diapers, and formula. There's sleep deprivation. There's Peter assuming Rebecca will know what to do with Mary because she's a woman (literally; he says this. She shoots him down because she is a modern woman and it's 1987 and she is on a date, ok??). And then there is the beautiful bond and love that each man develops for Mary.



Parenting 101: hostage negotiations.

And Sylvia? Is someone checking on poor Sylvia? No? Okay, cool cool cool. She's just Mary's mother, having a mental breakdown, no biggie. After the three men (Jack returns early from Turkey, his part having been cut from the TV movie) have fallen head-over-heels for Mary and their new roles as dad-uncles, Sylvia returns, somewhat recovered from the distress that led her to leave Mary at Jack's door, with a plan in place to help her cope: she and Mary will be flying to London, to move in with Sylvia's family, tonight. Cue the Sad Dad-Uncle moping. Luckily, Sylvia has a change of heart, and Peter, Michael, and Jack decide to commit to Dad-Uncle life—and a quadrangle family unit—by having Sylvia and Mary move in. Possibly sleeping in the glass atrium greenhouse hallway? Who's to say?

It's a happy ending for all, most of all Mary, who has four times the parental love raising her up. I am still a little worried about Sylvia, to be honest. And listen, do I love the underlying idea of the movie that men are immature bachelors until literally forced to grow up by a woman (or women/surprise baby girls) in their life? No, I do not. Do I still enjoy this movie and genuinely giggle at times and find myself charmed by its antics and its commitment to alternative family structures? You bet I do! Heck, I could even relate to some bits. There is way too much crap in the baby aisle at the store and it is confusing. Also, baby poop is gross! Hardly revelatory or even all that funny as a bit, but true nonetheless.

I'm not alone in being won over by this movie. Aside from the earlier French adaptation,



Manhattan Chapter of the Babysitters Club.

there's an American sequel (*Three Men and a Little Lady* (1990) [5]), and a *Three Men and a Baby* remake announced in 2020, with Zac Efron attached [6], but it has yet to be made. *Three Men and a Baby* was the first live-action Disney film to earn over \$100 million domestically [7] and it currently boasts a Rotten Tomatoes score of 67% [8]. It's not the best comedy you'll ever see, but it has its' moments, particularly when it comes to the charm oozing out of Selleck, Guttenberg, and Danson's performances. I listed the actors in order of most-to-least charming, by the way—Danson's performance actually felt a bit over-the-top to me.

In 1987, Maslin compared *Three Men and a Baby* to its French counterpart, finding the American version had lost some of the luster but asserted that "the spectacle of three grown men falling in love with their tiny charge is heartwarming as ever" [9.] Roger Ebert wrote off the heroin subplot completely (he had a point) and was only interested in the movie once Baby Mary showed up [10].

And what about when the ghost showed up? Tricked ya! There's no actual ghost in the movie, but the apparent appearance of one in the background of one scene (actually a cardboard cutout of Danson) is one of those persistent urban legends that somehow made the rounds in the pre-internet days and is still debated today [11]. No, the only haunting happening in *Three Men and a Baby* is the specter of the awful opening credits song that claims "boys will be boys" over and over again ("Bad Boy" by The Miami Sound Machine [12]). At least these three boys finally became men. Overbite.



The Night was Neurotic ***Throw Momma From the Train***

by: Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

Throw Momma From the Train popped up in a recent Ask Reddit thread surveying people about movies they loved as a child, but can't stand to watch as an adult (something that sure comes up often in this zine). One user mentioned this movie, saying that they loved it until they started seeing their own mother act like the titular Momma (Anne Ramsey in her last film role). "Suddenly it wasn't funny anymore when you're in Owen's shoes..." Is she a Momma you also want to toss off a train? A Momma with unpleasant idiosyncrasies and baffling brief (very brief!) moments of tenderness? This movie's Momma is both.

This was not a movie on our radar in the 80s. That it was a Billy Crystal and Danny DeVito movie (nevermind casual murder) made it

much too "grown-up" for our tastes. But, we were very familiar with one particular scene in which Danny DeVito (who also directs), as the aforementioned Owen, is having breakfast with his friend, Larry (Billy Crystal). Owen's curmudgeonly Momma asks who the stranger is and Owen tells her it's cousin Paddy. There's a beat where Owen and Larry hold their breath expecting her to buy this lie, but she grumpily snaps at Owen, saying that he doesn't have a cousin Paddy. Another beat, and then Owen, feigning anger, says to Larry "you lied to me!" and bonks him loudly over the head with a frying pan. Billy Crystal falls out of the chair. It's a terrific scene that naturally served as one of the trailers for the film, and it really highlights how the dynamic of these three performers made the movie so funny.



Making love on a fake train.

Throw Momma From the Train is loosely based on Patricia Highsmith's debut novel, *Strangers on a Train*, and more directly, Hitchcock's 1951 adaptation of the same name (we see Owen watching the movie). In the original story, two strangers strike up a conversation on a train. The first is a young guy from a rich family; basically an amalgam of Tom Ripley and Dickie Greenleaf. He hates his overbearing, disapproving father and wants him dead. The second guy also has someone causing him some serious agita: a cheating wife who is dragging her feet on a divorce and, in turn, delaying marriage to his new sweetie. So, the young guy concocts the perfect plan to eliminate both thorns in their respective sides. They will swap murders. The young guy will kill the cheating wife, and the other man will kill the overbearing father. Theoretically, it's harder to pin a murder on someone without a motive. (We're going to be talking a lot about murder in this essay, and we're not going to pussyfoot through it with the term "unalive").

All that might work fine, assuming everything else goes according to plan, but what if one of the parties was already pretty vocal about how much they hated someone and wanted them dead? That's exactly what happens in *Throw Momma From the Train*. Larry is a writer who can't seem to write anything until he finishes the most perfect (and pointless) first sentence. (This is the whole bit for the opening credits). He had a hot idea for a book already, but it was stolen by his ex-wife Margaret (played by the excellent Kate Mulgrew). Now, she's rich and famous and publicly humiliating him while he's stuck teaching creative writing to a bunch of hacks at the community college. But, don't get



Criss-cross (will make you jump, jump).

him started about Margaret, because then he won't shut up about her. He even goes so far as to yell in the cafeteria about how much he'd like to kill her.

His student, Owen, a sort of disturbingly childish middle-aged man, can relate. He really hates his perpetually slurring, snarling Momma. They live together and she is always belittling him. It's fitting that she is played by Mama Fratelli (from *The Goonies* (1985)) because they have a lot in common. Imagine if Mama retired from the crime biz and became even more cantankerous (Ramsey even got some real slaps in during the shoot). But, unlike neurotic Larry, Owen quietly fantasizes about knocking off his mother. A little poison here, a little push there, and he'd be free. There's a shot of Anne Ramsey with a set of scissors through her ears that is pretty shocking, though not gory, so brace yourself.

When Owen asks Larry to critique one of his crime stories about a murder most foul, they get on the subject of motives and alibis. Larry, of course, brings up Margaret and how much he wants to kill her, but he can't because he has a motive and everybody knows. Owen confesses that he feels the same way about Momma. Larry suggests to Owen that he study Hitchcock's movies. Owen misinterprets the situation, thinking Larry is talking about much more than just his story, and, after watching *Strangers on a Train*, makes "criss-cross" his new hypnotic mantra. Owen decides he will kill Margaret so Larry can kill Momma. Criss-cross.

One of the things that made *Strangers on a Train* such a good story was that the young



Nice night for a *Titanic* reenactment?

man proposing to swap murders insinuates himself more and more into the other man's life. Even if the second man fulfills his end of the bargain, you start to realize that the young man isn't going away, at least not voluntarily. The second man will always have to live with the guilt and the threat of detection, and all because of a chance meeting on a train.

Owen might be a bigger threat. He's a charming psychotic who is kind of childish and dumb and speaks casually about committing murder ("a lovable simpleton" to borrow *Nostalgialand*'s description [1]). And, he turns Larry's life upside down purely by virtue of a misunderstanding. (Shoutout to the *Plotaholics* podcast who suggested that this could almost be an *Always Sunny* episode with Dennis and Charlie standing in for the Larry and Owen roles, respectively [2]).

What especially makes the film so funny is that Owen gets straight to work, and he's so casual about everything. There's a great gag where Owen keeps calling Larry from various phones in deserted Hawaiian locales to inform him that his job is done. Owen tells him, "I don't want to say over the phone. All I can tell ya is that I killed her last night." And then he hangs up. In a way, DeVito nicely captures that Highsmith way of seemingly normal things being just a bit off.

Naturally, once Margaret goes missing, the police come looking for Larry and his alibi that he was with a friend till early in the morning quickly starts to fall apart. The first half of the film feels like a lot of filler, and maybe because Margaret is the least interesting



Dangling Momma from a Train.

(underdeveloped?) character. The momentum really ramps up post-Margaret when Owen expects Larry to fulfill his end of a bargain that Larry never expected nor actually agreed to. Naturally, Larry refuses, but with the lingering threat of Owen snitching to the cops (you can never really tell how devious the guy really is), he tries keeping up appearances while doing his best to fail at the task. Of course, even he starts to crack in the face of Owen's dear old maybe oblivious Momma. The situation turns increasingly chaotic, and gets funnier as it does, culminating in the trio taking a ride on the train. (Yeah, there's not much time spent on an actual train in this movie). And that's as much of the ending as we will spoil.

Larry tells his girlfriend in one scene that people love romances and mysteries when there is a train (it's a persistent motif). They certainly did in this case. *Throw Momma From the Train* was a hit at the box office (even earning Ramsey an Oscar nom) when it hit theaters in December of 1987. The film, written by Stu Silver, who pretty much worked in TV, also marked Danny DeVito's feature film directorial debut (he, too, previously directed a few things for TV). He agreed to play Owen on the condition that he also be allowed to direct, envisioning the film as an over-the-top black comedy, "a comedy of terrors, errors, and all those things combined."

Entertainment Weekly reported in 2023 that Danny DeVito is working on a Train sequel with Billy Crystal, saying (joking?) that they're thinking of throwing pappa from the train [3]. How many parents does one duo need to bump off, anyways?



The Third Rule *Twins*

by: Stephanie McDevitt

Twins is one of those movies I watched many times as a kid, and it's one of those movies I was afraid would not hold up. I couldn't remember much of it aside from the ridiculous premise that Danny DeVito and Arnold Schwarzenegger could be brothers, let alone twins. But, I was relieved and pleasantly surprised when I rewatched it. It's a silly movie, and while it felt a bit slow at times, I enjoyed it, and it's always nice returning to a movie you loved as a kid to find you still like it.

Twins tells the story of Julius (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Vincent Benedict (Danny DeVito), fraternal twin brothers separated at birth. They were the result of a secret genetic experiment in which a bunch of shady scientists were trying to create the perfect child.

These guys mixed up the sperm of five different men who were thought to have elite DNA, and then they inseminated a young woman named Maryanne Benedict (the young version of Maryanne was played by Heather Graham). To the scientists' surprise, two babies were born: one with the desired genetic traits and one who is unpleasantly described as the leftover genetic material.

Julius goes on to live on a Pacific island with Professor Werner (Tony Jay), one of the scientists from the experiment. Julius spends his time studying and working out and turns into quite the physical and educated specimen. Vincent is sent to an orphanage and has a tough childhood. He ends up stealing cars and borrowing money from small-time loan sharks,

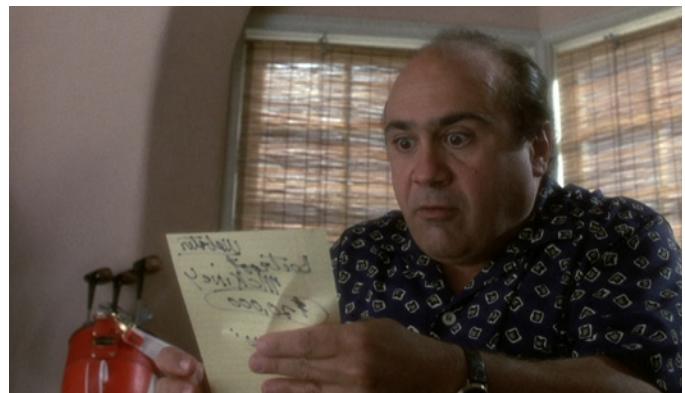


There are two babies??!

the Klane brothers. Julius and Vincent couldn't be more different!

On their 35th birthday, Professor Werner finally tells Julius that he has a brother, and Julius is intent on finding him. He heads to Los Angeles to track down Vincent and to experience the real world for the first time. It doesn't take too long for Julius to find Vincent in L.A. county jail. Vincent doesn't believe Julius at first, but he recognizes that Julius's size will work in his favor, so he tricks Julius into helping him steal a car, and when Morris Klane (David Efron) comes to collect Vincent's debt, Julius defends him. Eventually we learn that Julius thinks their mother died at birth. But Vincent says that she's still alive, and he shows Julius the paperwork he stole from the orphanage that proves it. Vincent is sure that their mom just abandoned him, and he wants nothing to do with her. But, Julius convinces him that they need to go find her.

Meanwhile, Vincent discovers that the car they stole has a prototype fuel injector in the trunk that was supposed to be delivered to a company in Houston by a guy named Mr. Webster (Marshall Bell) for a \$5 million payment. Vincent decides he'll deliver the injector and take the money. Once Julius finds out Vincent is going to Houston, he convinces Vincent to take him and to stop in Santa Fe where they can ask the scientists who were involved in their birth experiment to help find their mother. Vincent reluctantly agrees and Julius, Vincent, and their girlfriends, Marnie (Kelly Preston) and Linda (Chloe Webb), pile in the car and head to Houston.



Vincent is about to get rich!

What follows is a road trip filled with firsts for Julius, some sad information for Vincent, and, of course, a shootout. Now that I'm sitting here trying to describe this movie, I think it sounds like a weird premise, but, for the most part, it works because Schwarzenegger and DeVito are so charming and play off each other well. There are times where the plot feels like it's trying to do too much, but as reviewer Blake Peterson points out, it's probably because there are four credited screen writers on this movie, which sometimes gives it "a crowded, too-many-cooks feeling" [1]. Peterson also points out that despite the way the script occasionally feels too busy, Ivan Reitman is able to keep it light and pleasant. He says, "if one is to have any ill will toward *Twins*, it might have more to do with it not mining the absurdity of its premise for more jokes" [2].

Reitman, however, does find a lot of jokes simply by exploiting the size of his two leading actors. At the start of the movie, when Julius decides to travel to L.A., he leaves his island home in a row boat. Watching Schwarzenegger row that small boat furiously through the ocean is impressive. When he gets to L.A., there is a whole montage of Schwarzenegger walking the streets, towering above everyone, and eating something different in every scene. Julius even stops in front of a poster of Rambo III and briefly compares his bicep with Stallone's bicep.

Once Julius and Vincent finally meet, Reitman just keeps putting them next to each other so we can see the size disparity (Schwarzenegger is 6'2" and DeVito is 5'0"). And, no matter



I wanna dance with somebody.

how many times you see it, it's always funny and it gets funnier every time they have to tell someone that they're twin brothers. The best part comes when they have to buy some new clothes, and they buy matching suits. Then Vincent tries to explain to Julius how to walk down the street with some swagger, and Schwarzenegger awkwardly tries to walk like DeVito.

Twins was Schwarzenegger's first comedy, and I think it works because he plays Julius very sincerely. Julius has done nothing outside of his very sheltered, rigid life on the island. So, while he's read about almost everything, he doesn't experience anything until he gets to L.A. For instance, he's never driven a car, but he's sure he can do it if he just scans through the manual first. I think playing Julius as smart but inexperienced is the only way this movie works. If Schwarzenegger had played him as dumb, it would have flopped.

Schwarzenegger had to prove to the studio that he could do comedy and do it successfully. He said, "When I was the action hero in the '80s and '90s, they wouldn't allow me to do any comedy or anything for kids. They were like, 'No, we know we are going to make money with you if you do action movies.' So literally for '*Twins*' I took no salary—I just wanted to give it a shot. And it just happened to be my first movie to make \$100 million domestic. So they realized that it works, Schwarzenegger can cross over" [3].

Schwarzenegger decided not to take a salary from the movie and instead only wanted



It's a hold up!

a share in the movie's profits (DeVito and Reitman had the same deal). Not only did this movie make a ton of money (and the most money Schwarzenegger made on any movie in his career [4]), but it became the first of three comedies that Schwarzenegger and Reitman made together. They went on to do *Kindergarten Cop* and *Junior*.

Apparently, there was a sequel to *Twins* in the works for many years with Schwarzenegger, Reitman, and DeVito on board. In 2012, Universal announced the sequel, called *Triplets*, which would have had Eddie Murphy as their long lost brother. In 2015, the project was put on hold. In 2021, it was announced they were going to start filming in January of 2022 with Tracy Morgan replacing Eddie Murphy as the other brother. Unfortunately, Ivan Reitman died in February of 2022, and the following year his son Jason said the project was dead [5]. Schwarzenegger was pissed. He said, "Jason Reitman fucked it up!...Jason Reitman literally stopped the project when his father died" [6].

Twins received mixed reviews, but I think if you can suspend belief in the ridiculous plot, it's a fun movie. And, the people of 1988 agreed with me because, as I previously mentioned, it killed at the box office. It opened number one in the US and earned \$11 million dollars in its opening weekend. It grossed \$112 million in the US and \$216 million worldwide on an \$18 million budget [7]. So, if you want to watch a silly, feel-good movie, check it out and enjoy watching Schwarzenegger tower over DeVito.



“I Swore Things Would be Different With My Kids.”

Parenthood

by: Tom Scelza

Parenthood begins with the gruff voice of Jason Robards coming from a younger man's body. He pays an usher at a baseball game to watch his kid while he leaves. The boy, Gil Buckman (Max Elliot Slade) tells the friendly usher, "This is a memory of when I was a kid. I'm 35 now. I have kids of my own. You don't even really exist. You're an amalgam." Oh, those SAT words...amalgam. This is pretty mercurial writing for a period of ideas etched in plastic.

The best part of *Parenthood* is the writing. It takes serious moments and ends them in laughter. It is not an easy thing to explain, as it is the story of many members of the Buckman family, starting with the son Gil, played wonderfully by Steve Martin, his two sisters, and his dad (Jason Robards).

One sister, Helen (Oscar nominated Dianne Wiest) is a single divorced mom with two teenagers (Martha Plimpton as Julie and Joaquin Phoenix–then Leaf Phoenix–as Garry). The other is younger sister Susan (Harley Jane Kozak), who is married to a domineering husband (Rick Moranis) and has a little girl. Less focused on is their father, Frank (Jason Robards), and his relationship with their black sheep brother Larry (Tom Hulce).

It's a wonderful story, kept a comedy, by director Ron Howard's sensitive character direction..Gil and his wife Karen (Mary Steenburgen) are called to school, because their high-strung son, Kevin's (Jasen Fisher) disruptive behavior leaves his teacher little time for other students. Both parents are upset over the "recommendation" to place him



AMAL-WHAT-EM?

in an ESE school. Gil, in particular, devotes much time in trying to understand and redirect Kevin's behavior.

Helen is a lonely divorcee, struggling with her teenage children. Julie is sexually active, sneaking her boyfriend Tod (Keanu Reeves) under her bed. Later, they secretly elope and Julie announces she is pregnant. Helen's son, Garry is a withdrawn boy who talks to no one and carries around a paper bag secretly containing porno tapes.

Susan is a teacher. Her husband Nathan, is a bright, but controlling partner who makes plans for her and their daughter (Ivyann Schwan) based on scientific principles of good child rearing. The pre-K daughter, though very well educated, is awkward around her cousins, especially Gil's kids, of whom Nathan disapproves. Susan binges on junk food she hides in the closet. When Nathan accuses her of sabotaging her diaphragm to become pregnant, she leaves them both.

Frank is a terrible father and a worse husband. When his son Larry comes back into the picture, three years after slipping away from the family, Frank is thrilled. He even throws out his mother-in-law (Helen Shaw in her final film) to make room for Larry. Larry unexpectedly presents his four-year-old son, Cool (Alex Burrall) at a family gathering he crashes. Frank learns that Larry owes mobsters more than \$20 grand after Larry has Frank's beloved 1935 Ford Model 48 Deluxe convertible secretly appraised. Frank offers to help pay, provided Larry works in and eventually takes over his plumbing business. Larry says he is going to another country to try another big deal. He



Helen braces for disappointment.

dumps Cool on Frank and leaves, probably never to return.

This dour *Parenthood* synopsis would make *Veronika Voss* seem like a romantic musical. Is this the most depressing movie you have ever heard of? Absolutely not. The skillful writing, structure, and casting make it a movie that sucks you in and you never much think about until it is over. Classic director George Cukor once said that the crew would go to a film's preview analyzing what had happened when lines got laughs that were not intended. They had to work backward and figure out what had triggered audiences and correct their mistakes. Comedy is the reverse, comics have to build in order to pull a laugh. It's a logical progression.

Steve Martin's talents are well suited for this part. Not a great standup, he has always been competent as an actor (remember the Festrunk Brothers sketches on *SNL*?). Under Ron Howard, he is funny, joyful, and touching all at once. There is not a goofier sequence in this film than when he transforms into a makeshift birthday cowboy, when the originally scheduled performer is accidentally swapped with a stripper [1]. The kids love it. His sisters and mother are wildly howling. He rides off into the sunset only to fall off his horse. Later, when Kevin catches a fly ball, which makes him a hero, you see Martin doing the happy dance, so perfectly fit for the movie.

Dianne Wiest is always a pleasure, although this is the same mom character she played in *Lost Boys* (1987) and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). Here though, we see a her unpack into someone who once dreamed of another life



Textbook parenting to the max.

until single parenting took its toll. The father of her kids is never seen, has another family, and never acknowledges the one he left. When her son Garry confesses that he wants to live with his father, it is she, not the father, who quietly witnesses her son's pain. It is she who runs after her son-in-law, Tod, when he crashes his race car. It is she who tells Tod he is important because he is her grandson's future father. When Garry later commends her for her compassion, she tells him, I wouldn't be surprised if they last six months—four, if Julie continues cooking. Again, that humorous humanity punctuates the film.

The third bit of excellent casting is Rick Moranis, in a part which would have easily become a heavy. Married to the second Buckman daughter (Susan), he is insistent and domineering, but not to be taken seriously in the end. After she leaves him, he shows up at the school where she teaches and serenades her during class, asking her to come back. He starts to sing their wedding song, Close to You, while the students look on amazed..—"Nathan, we're trying so hard to keep these kids off drugs." And of course, the kiss in front of cheering students.

The ensemble cast is incredible. Four years after *The Goonies*, Martha Plimpton is excellent as Julie. So is her goofy husband, the future John Wick, Keanu Reeves. Although Tod is basically identical to his Ted Logan character, there are the conversations with Helen that reveal a full-fledged adult. Many are total surprises, including a very young Joaquin Phoenix, who gives a wonderful performance as the mixed-up Gary. His phone sequence with his distant father is heartbreaking for so



It's no bueno for Frank's imagined life with Larry.

young an actor. Tom Hulce, like Moranis, plays against type, which makes his abandonment of his son less shocking. Finally, Helen Shaw, as the Buckman grandma hardly has any lines early on, but you see at once her displeasure with her son-in-law, Frank. When Helen finds Garry's pornographic tapes and is caught watching them by Susan and Grandma, she says, "One of those men reminded me of your Grandpa. God bless him!"

And then there is Frank. Jason Robards was a wonderful character, never given anything light. Frank is somewhat obnoxious in the early parts of the movie, but then we start to really see as he sits in the dining room with Larry, you spend time looking at the house, at the curtains and tablecloths and silver serving pieces. This is the end result of a man's life, where Frank maneuvered his life to be in. Family gatherings center on weddings, graduations or funerals. Often, family births seem to be close together, as cousins knit new bonds.

Parenthood closes with the family in the waiting room of a maternity ward. Time has passed. Julie and Todd, and Gil and Karen, with babies. Patty is pregnant. Cool is with his grandparents. Grandma is still alive. There is a surprising new mom in the bunch, and it took me two screenings to put it together).

Parenthood was the first major film shot in my hometown of Orlando. It became a big hit, costing \$20 million dollars and made \$126 million worldwide [2]. It also spawned two television series, first in the early 90s, and then more popular NBC series in the early aughts.



Who Ya Gonna Call? **Uncle Buck**

by: Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

In the recent documentary about John Candy, *John Candy: I Like Me* (2025), Macaulay Culkin reminds viewers that, although we so often associate Molly Ringwald with John Hughes's movies—she was his muse, afterall—it was actually John Candy who holds the honor of appearing in the most John Hughes films. He had roles in nine films in total, and was slated for more, had it not been for his untimely death from a heart attack in 1994. We loved him as the impotent Wally World security guard in *National Lampoon's Vacation* (1983), half of a holiday odd couple in *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* (1989) (see Issue #10), as Mrs. McCallister's polka-playing savior in *Home Alone* (1990), and here, as the titular Buck Russell, a charismatic, blue-collar uncle

summoned to play stand-in suburban dad during a family emergency. It's classic Candy, and because of him, the movie really endures. (Seriously, they've tried other versions of Buck that just didn't cut it).

Hughes's movies always seem to begin with a very simple idea that turns into a whole lot more: a forgotten birthday, a day off, detention. *Uncle Buck* is no different, opening with a phone call in the wee hours of the morning informing the Russell family that grandpa has had a heart attack. Mom and Dad Russell expect to leave town as soon as possible, but need someone to watch their three kids. They reluctantly turn to Dad's estranged brother, Buck, who lives in Chicago. Buck agrees, quietly reveling in his



Awkward debrief.

good fortune, as the indefinite call to duty will excuse him from a new job he doesn't want selling tires for his extremely patient girlfriend, Chanice (Amy Madigan).

Mom and Dad make a pretty quick exit and the guy who can't remember his niece and nephew's names is left to his own devices to navigate life in the family's upper middle class suburb. Most of it is amusing, minor incidents like arriving at the wrong house (one of the funniest bits), palling with the younger Russell kids, futzing with appliances, and entertaining a lonely neighbor (played by the excellent Laurie Metcalf). There is always something happening. Occasionally, he freaks out the squares.

For all the oddball things that might happen in Hughes's imagined worlds, or at least in his comedies, they always come back to something more grounded, and Buck faces bigger challenges later on, dealing with his terminally angsty niece, Tia (Jean Louise Kelley), and patching up a fledging long-distance relationship with Chanice. Thankfully, it never gets too saccharine.

Maybe it's the totality of Candy's body of work, minus whatever the hell *Nothing But Trouble* (1991) was, clouding our judgment, but it's hard to see how Buck came to be the family pariah. In the modern context, his failure to hit certain generational markers of "adulthood" aren't the anomaly anymore. His employment history seems fairly sketchy. He isn't married. He's a middle-aged man living in a studio apartment. He keeps company



Punchable faces.

with pals of similar character. But, other than dawdling on the topic of marriage, which Chanice makes very clear she wants (they're name-body-parts-together serious), what's the worst anyone could really say about Buck? That he should know better than to let the dog drink out of the toilet when there's the blue stuff in it? Sure.

He drinks and smokes cigars and gambles (offscreen), but he also cleans up nice. He isn't too gruff or crude or dumb (they saved a lot of that for sitcom Buck). He is also fiercely protective of the Russell kids. He defends his youngest niece, Maizy (Gabby Hoffman), when a stuffy school principal unnecessarily complains. He goes Tyson on a boozy birthday clown (Mike Starr, aka "The Gas Man") who shows up to his nephew Miles's (Culkin) party drunk off his ass. And, he makes sure Tia's shitty boyfriend Bug (Jay Underwood) behaves himself. (All the times we've seen this movie, and the unspoken "Bug up your ass" punchline finally dawned on us!).

The youngest of the Russell kids are surprised to discover the new stranger staying with them, understandably unaware of some of the family tree, as well as the situation that brings him there. Miles and Maizy are cute for sure, but Hoffman and Culkin only ever get to be bemused spectators to this unorthodox grown-up who curses at their temperamental washing machine and makes pancakes the size of a snow shovel—all the stuff that endeared us to Buck (to Candy, really) when we were kids, too. The more interesting dynamic is between Buck and Tia, who is like



What's more American than obscene portions?

a pre-enlightenment Jeannie Bueller cranked up to eleven. Tia gives her mother shit for “abandoning” her kids and then sneers at Buck (really, everyone...what happened to sincerity Mr. Hughes?!?) for the majority of his visit. For her, he is the embarrassing uncle that drives the comically loud car and has a weird sense of humor. Buck tries diplomacy and then agrees to disagree with Tia, though she keeps pushing her luck.

Both Tia and Buck have problems to work through, making them a sort of Manic Pixie Whatever for each other. The 17-year kid pretending so hard to be worldly and mature clashes HARD with the 30-something year old man who is, in many ways, just the opposite, refusing to grow up, and eventually they reflect and make peace. Was this narrative bifurcation and more generally of teen-versus-adult life imitating art?

By this point in the 1980s, the Patron Saint of Teen movies (Hughes) was moving beyond the genre. *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987) flopped, and except for the long-forgotten *Career Opportunities* (1991) and maybe never-remembered *Reach the Rock* (1998), he worked on family and kids movies from here on out. (Hughes, too, died suddenly from a heart attack years later). Similarly in the movie, the deck is curiously stacked against the insufferable teen. Buck naturally wins out.

Whether it was any kind of self reflection or not, it's a fairly strange send-off to the American teen character—if you count *Uncle Buck* as such, considering Tia's substantial



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contribution to the story—because Kelly's character feels the most disingenuous of any Hughes's fictional teens. Sure, kids at that age can be incredibly angsty, but she really has no allies to speak of? Even Bug feels purely placeholder in her life. This was something Roger Ebert noted in his review, too—a pervasive anger about the film emanating from Tia and her parents and even Chanice. Paging Zelda Rubenstein!

Tia's story might've worked more effectively on its own. The family is new to the neighborhood (maybe Shermer, but definitely Evanston) and she misses the old one, which was also closer to their ailing grandpa. The Russell parents largely seem clueless about their kids, so they are of little help. Throw in one or two best friends for Tia and maybe a compelling love interest (not Bug, he sucks!), make her nicer to her siblings, get some memorable side characters, pop in a few New Wave tracks, and offer Winona Ryder the lead (she was originally considered for Tia, but was busy filming one of the great 80s teen movies, *Heathers* (see Issue #13)). And voila!

Insufferable Tia aside, we still enjoy *Uncle Buck* after all these years...pretty much any John Candy movie, really. *Buck* was a hit when it released in 1989, cracking the Top 15 at the box office, a few notches below *Parenthood* [1] (also in this issue). We've already teased the sitcom adaptations—there were two, both short-lived. More interesting is the Indian remake, *Uncle Bun* (1991), featuring a slapstick Buck in a fat suit and weirdly animated food. As of this writing, you can find it on YouTube.

Endnotes

Ordinary People

Release Date: September 19, 1980

Written by: Alvin Sargent

Directed by: Robert Redford

Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

[1] "Redford's Ordinary People" (The New York Times, 1980) <https://tinyurl.com/r8r8c9jh>

[2] "The Untold Story of Ordinary People" (Entertainment Weekly, 2016) <https://tinyurl.com/ys456mzt>

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Seeing Yourself in Ordinary People" (RogerEbert.com, 2020) <https://tinyurl.com/3k5v56t2>

[5] "25 Biggest Oscar Snubs of All Time" (Entertainment Weekly, 2016) <https://tinyurl.com/yakepyxc>

[6] "Ordinary People" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/3c282pf2>

[7] "The Psychiatrist in Today's Movies: He's Everywhere and in Deep Trouble" (The New York Times, 1981) <https://tinyurl.com/yjcnykyy>

[8] Chris Vogner. "Seeing Yourself in Ordinary People" (RogerEbert.com, 2020) <https://tinyurl.com/3k5v56t2>

Polyester

Release Date: May 29, 1981

Written by: John Waters

Directed by: John Waters

Essay by: Sebastian Gregory

[1] "Divine Smells: Odorama, Melodrama, and the Body in John Waters' Polyester" (Open Screens Journal, 2022) <https://tinyurl.com/4ykbb4ym>

[2] "S1:E7 - My Friend, John Waters: The Making of Polyester with Cinematographer Dave Insley" (The Ghost of Hollywood Podcast, 2023) <https://tinyurl.com/35p293bc>

[3] "Polyester (film)" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/yb7wcurd>

[4] "Divine Smells: Odorama, Melodrama, and the Body in John Waters' Polyester" (Open Screens Journal, 2022) <https://tinyurl.com/4ykbb4ym>

[5] "Polyester" (IMDB) <https://tinyurl.com/5rpak6en>

[6] "John Waters Divine Comedy" (ArtForum, 1982) <https://tinyurl.com/43mz2d2>

Near Dark

Writer: Eric Red, Kathryn Bigelow

Director: Kathryn Bigelow

Released: 1987

Written by: Dr. Rhonda Baughman

[1] As of this writing, and according to Bigelow's Wiki.

[2] As of this writing, sans sequel, too! Surprising but I'm okay with it.

[3] So, Red has an interesting array of novels and screenplays, most notably The Hitcher (1986), but it's the bonkers Wiki account of his car crash and subsequent entanglements that

reads like its awaiting adaptation.

[4] After an injury, ending his football scholarship at the Univ. of Florida, he turned to acting. I noticed him again in Solarbabies (1986) but only noticed his chiseled jawline post-Dark during his three-episode arc as Randall Burke in the seventh season of the TV show Burn Notice. Pasdar is also well-known as the other half to Dixie Chick Natalie Maines from 2000-2017 [divorce finalized in 2019].

[5] Wright's IMDB resume is amazing. Hauntingly beautiful actress who never really got her due. A writing colleague I'll not name drop here interviewed and briefly befriended Wright, noting she had retired from acting and lived off the grid.

[6] Another bonkers Wiki (but this one in a positive way) – Leeds is retired from acting but went on to a different career entirely – as part of the medical team that saved the life of AZ US Rep Gabrielle Giffords.

[7] It was Bigelow's husband at the time, some dude named James Cameron, who suggested reuniting Henriksen, Goldstein, and Paxton – the trio having famously appeared together in Aliens (1986). Each performer's IMDB list is legend. Paxton {RIP} – we miss you.

[8] The scene where the family walk up a hill that overlooks the honky tonk before they run through it has always been my favorite, and so perfectly lit it made the bottom of the official movie poster, which of course, I have framed. Side note: absolutely ignore the ridiculous marketing cash-in that sent a re-release of the film out with a Twilight-inspired DVD cover. Look, I don't dislike the Twilight series, but Near Dark is NOT Twilight.

[9] For many reasons, but I not only appreciate them as viewer and critique them as writer, but my alter ego plays them, too – re: my IMDB for Rachelle Williams.

Three Men and a Baby

Release Date: November 25, 1987

Written by: Jim Cruickshank & James Orr

Directed by: Leonard Nimoy

Essay by: Jessica MacLeish

[1] "Three Men and a Baby, Production Info" ([IMDBPro.com](https://tinyurl.com/y4r86xfj)) <https://tinyurl.com/y4r86xfj>

[2] Ibid.

[3] "Three Men and a Baby, Trivia" ([IMDB.com](https://tinyurl.com/3xypfztt)) <https://tinyurl.com/3xypfztt>

[4] "Film: Three Men and a Baby" (The New York Times, 1987) <https://tinyurl.com/5m83n9he>

[5] "Three Men and a Little Lady" ([IMDB.com](https://tinyurl.com/3jmpwwvy)) <https://tinyurl.com/3jmpwwvy>

[6] "'Woke' Director Mo Marable to Helm Disney+'Three Men and a Baby' Reboot Starring Zac Efron" (Deadline, 2021) <https://tinyurl.com/y9edjpxx>

[7] Ibid.

[8] "Three Men and a Baby" (Rotten Tomatoes) <https://tinyurl.com/4d88w4j3>

[9] "Film: Three Men and a Baby" (The New York Times, 1987) <https://tinyurl.com/5m83n9he>

[10] "Three Men and a Baby" ([RogerEbert.com](https://tinyurl.com/4f6345n9), 1987) <https://tinyurl.com/4f6345n9>

[11] "The Urban Legend That Won't Die: The Truth Behind the Three Men and a Baby Ghost" (Women's Day, 2017) <https://tinyurl.com/ys9b276f>

[12] "Three Men and a Baby, Production Info" ([IMDBPro.com](https://tinyurl.com/y4r86xfj)) <https://tinyurl.com/y4r86xfj>

Throw Momma From the Train

Release date: December 11, 1987

Directed by: Danny DeVito

Written by: Stu Silver

Essay by: Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

[1] “It’s Throw Momma from the Train!”

(NostalgiaLand, 2024)

<https://tinyurl.com/59cp2v32>

[2] “Throw Momma From the Train” (The Plotaholics Podcast)<https://tinyurl.com/3jcwc5vw>

[3] “Billy Crystal is working on a Throw Momma From the Train sequel with Danny DeVito” (Entertainment Weekly, 2023) <https://tinyurl.com/7zj2sybe>

Twins

Release Date: December 9, 1988

Written by: William Davies, Timothy Harris, William Osborne, Herschel Weingrod

Directed by: Ivan Reitman

Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

[1] “Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito’s Chemistry Carries ‘Twins’” (Peterson Review, 2025) <https://tinyurl.com/yvyapujp>

[2] Ibid.

[3] “Arnold Schwarzenegger on starring in Stan Lee’s final project and if he’s sore from that dropkick that went viral” (Business Insider, 2019) <https://tinyurl.com/53y4bemp>

[4] “Twins (1988 film)” (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/2nh696u5>

[5] Ibid.

[6] “Arnold Schwarzenegger says his Twins

sequel is dead: ‘Jason Reitman f—ed it up!’” (Entertainment Weekly, 2023) <https://tinyurl.com/ybx83kty>

[7] “Twins (1988 film)” (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/2nh696u5>

Parenthood

Release date August 2, 1989

Directed by Ron Howard

Written by: Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel (screenplay); Lowell Ganz, Babaloo Mandel and Ron Howard (story)

Essay by: Tom Scelza

[1] The Cowboy Gil scene

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAN7AGY4vww>

[2] “Why Parenthood is a CLASSIC!” (JoBlo

Originals, 2025) <https://tinyurl.com/y7p57k7h>

and “Parenthood” (Box Office Mojo) <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r12221508097>

Uncle Buck

Release Date: August 16, 1989

Directed by: John Hughes

Written by: John Hughes

Essay by: Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

[1] “Domestic Box Office For 1989” (Box Office Mojo) <https://tinyurl.com/yh9xxkr4>

Girls, on Film

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