

## Lifeless Doll Horror 'Annabelle' Just Taking Up Shelf Space

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Rating: **1.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The opening text to “Annabelle” comically clues its audience into the significance of dolls - beloved child play things, and/or vessels for evil spirits, whatever floats your boat. This spin-off of the mute toy from “The Conjuring” (as later made love to intensely by Marlon Wayans in “A Haunted House 2”) presents a different usage as well, that of taking up shelf space. Like second-class beers from booze conglomerates or some Adam Sandler movies, “Annabelle” is most of a dibs on marquee room by the “Conjuring” franchise, the sleeper hit in 2013 that’s not just a spook movie but also a restless ongoing lawsuit concerning ownership to its not-so-true story. All of this achieved without the main force of evil, a doll, having to lift a finger. Or, blinking.

Echoing the story of “The Conjuring” in set-up, this spin-off/prequel picks a family from an early 1970s PSA on how to be boring and places them into a tale of terror in the era of Charles Manson’s Helter Skelter. Wife Mia (Annabelle Wallis) and John (Ward Horton) are preparing to welcome their new baby into their quiet suburb home. These plans are complicated when the two are attacked in their home by wacko occult members one night, which causes distress to Mia’s pregnancy, and some occultist blood to get in the eye of her beloved Annabelle doll, a gift from her husband. Supernatural shenanigans soon ensue leading up to the baby’s birth, even though Annabelle gets trash-canned for being in the arms of one of the occultists when she died.

After a sudden fire in their home, the new unit of three moves to a high rise in the city where the doll finds its way into a moving box, and Mia essentially forgets her initial anxiety about its horrific significance. With John off to work to do doctor stuff, Mia ends up confronting different freaky weirdness, experiencing ruthless anxiety concerning her safety and the devil’s desire for her baby’s soul.



'Annabelle'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Given the very specific engineering behind the film, another glossy haunted house fill with jump scares and tedious oddities that go nowhere,



there is a soft quality to the film when contextualizing it as modern multiplex fare. To quote a recent film, “America loves pregnant women,” and that sentiment carries over as the matriarch remains in tact, a poor young mother terrorized and pushed around by an evil, mean spirit. With these factors in action, the movie only touches upon its bigger ideas (which are recognized more vividly in upcoming Chicago International Film Festival entry “The Babadook,”) and leaves them to be dug up in its movie references. Despite the terrain laid out, this slick horror flick isn’t out to challenge its audience beyond their ability to be scared by plotted mischievousness. Its best scare comes from a psychological fake-out not related to electricity and creaky doors gone wild, but one that shows the anxiety muffled by the film. Occurring in the third act, even when viewing a certain act of violence without the thematic context, “Annabelle” presents a disturbing act of violence that briefly feels like horror.

Of many films that specifically reference others, especially horror movies that reference others (like the “Final Destination” movies or “Urban Legends: Final Cut”), “Annabelle” is one of the odder footnotes in referential horror, a product of this spin-off’s short-sighted nature. It has a very peculiar relationship with its true mother, “Rosemary’s Baby,” beyond just its intentional visual connections, and naming the blonde matriarch in this story Mia (as in Mia Farrow, AKA Rosemary). Late 60s-set “Annabelle” connects to “Rosemary’s Baby” with its specific, punctuating conclusion of Helter Skelter in the beginning, as if this movie yearns to be the version of 1968’s “Rosemary’s Baby” that exists in a world that its director Roman Polanski does as well, and is haunted by the events in a similar way.



‘Annabelle’

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Outside of the films whose themes it wants to be a conduit of, “Annabelle” lacks a seeping vision, its redundant close-ups of Annabelle’s unflinching face notwithstanding. (Such was a tedious tease in “The Conjuring” as well; maybe in the sequel the doll ... will ... blink?) Zooms are used inefficiently as bids for visual tension, and the background is always framed as the wandering boogeyman’s (or boogeylady’s) realm, diffusing tension of scraggly ne’er-do-wells with silliness and obviousness. The simple thrill of the jump scare is the cheap horror instrument that “Annabelle” tries to deal with best; the film goes silent (and the audience sometimes too) only to clumsily unleash a big bang of one over-plotted ghoul image after another. “Annabelle’s” horror is not horrific, but it is tiresome.

*“Annabelle” opens on October 3rd. Starring Annabelle Wallis, Ward Horton, Alfre Woodard, and Tony Amendola. Written by Gary Dauberman. Directed by John R. Leonetti. Rated “R”*



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