

## Document Citation

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| Title         | <b>You'll swelter at these chillers</b>        |
| Author(s)     | Joy Gould Boyum                                |
| Source        | <i>Publisher name not available</i>            |
| Date          |  |
| Type          | review   |
| Language      | English  |
| Pagination    |  |
| No. of Pages  | 1  |
| Subjects      |  |
| Film Subjects | The Amityville horror, Rosenberg, Stuart, 1979 |

# You'll Swelter at These Chillers

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

A creaking door. A piercing scream. Lightning crackling through the sky on a dark stormy night. One would think that the strategies were so elementary, the shock techniques so obvious, that it would be fairly easy to make an effective horror film. And all the more so since the horror film is in a tradition emphatically Grade B, and tends to awaken so little in the way of expectations. We certainly don't ask such films to serve up dimensional characters or to dramatize substantial themes. All we want from them is a good scare.

Yet a good scare is precisely what a couple of current would-be chillers—"The Amityville Horror" and "Dracula"—fail to

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## On Film

"The Amityville Horror"

"Dracula"

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give us. And not for want of the tried and true. Each is, in fact, rife with screams and creaks and electrical storms, not to mention ghostly beings. So why don't they make our hair stand on end, send chills running down our spine? Can it be that we've become jaded? More likely, the deceptively simple horror film is not so simple to make after all.

Consider "The Amityville Horror." Based on Jay Anson's bestseller, the movie, directed by Stuart Rosenberg and written by Sandor Stern, tells the purportedly true story of a Long Island couple who buy a house in which a multiple murder has taken place and find themselves persecuted by supernatural phenomena. The film should have been absolutely terrifying. Not only does it make use of that old reliable—the haunted house—but it also, through the Catholicism of the couple (James Brolin and Margot Kidder) and their relationship with a family priest (Rod Steiger), summons up our current involvement with matters religious and demonic.

Nonetheless, the movie fails to elicit more than a tremble or two. It never

really gives us any sense of the point and purpose of the haunting—our fears remain unfocussed. Chairs may rock, doors may be unhinged, and windows smashed mysteriously, but to what end we don't know. Do these demons want to kill the couple and their children? To possess them? Or simply to drive them from their home? And if so, why? And who are they in the first place? The ghosts of the people who were murdered? A vengeful tribe of Indians? (The house, we discover, was built on an ancient burial ground.) Or are they manifestations of the Devil himself?

And we are further confused (and thus distracted) by a barrel full of red herrings: a hovering police sergeant whose constant surveillance uncovers not a thing; a seemingly demonic child who is not demonic at all; a chilling resemblance between our hero and the mass murderer, the significance of which totally escapes us. Obviously, a horror film needs some false leads and mystery, but what we have here instead is a mere muddle.

It's not just confusion, however, that does the horror of "Amityville" in. It's also the film's slow pace, meandering structure, and repetitiousness. The point is that these demons (whoever they are) prove to be hopelessly unimaginative. Not only do they keep doing the same thing over and over again; what they do is so mundane. They stuff up toilets, send drafts through the house, jam windows, and bring infestations of insects. The one thing they neglect is a plague of crabgrass on the lawn. And all the lightning in the world (there's never been a non-tropical movie with so much rain) won't lend such domestic disturbances true terror. For while a good horror film may well have elements of the familiar, it must strike a delicate balance between the familiar and strange. Failing to do so, "Amityville" serves up little more than an Erma Bombeckian vision of deviltry.