

***Wes Craven: Interviews* edited by Shannon Blake Skelton,
University Press of Mississippi, 2019, 246pp.**

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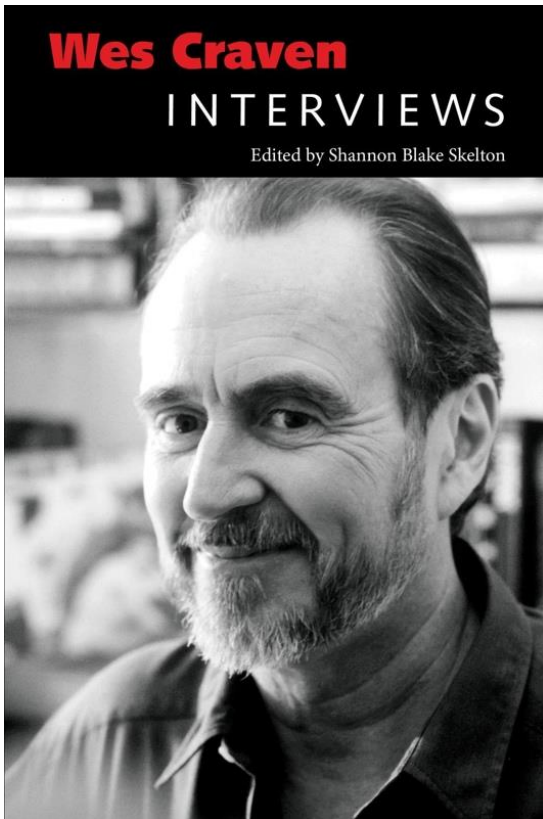
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Book Review

Wes Craven: Interviews

Edited by Shannon Blake Skelton
University Press of Mississippi,
2019

246pp.

It is sadly ironic that Wes Craven, best known for *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), in which an evil entity kills people in their dreams, died of brain cancer in 2015. Perhaps there's a dark humor in that irony which Craven himself might have appreciated. It was, among other things, Craven's often incongruous humor that distinguished his horror.

The bungling Keystone Kops of *The Last House on the Left* (1972), the corny wisecracks of *Nightmare's* Freddy Krueger, the deadpan jokes of the *Scream* films (1996-2011), each amplified the horror in which Craven's characters found themselves. To paraphrase a point Craven made in several variations over the years, we are sacks of guts held in by about a quarter of an inch of skin, and the slightest prick spills all our hopes and dreams to the ground.¹ That simple notion, the precariousness of being a living, squishy body, is arguably the fundamental source of both horror and comedy. Craven's existential angst about society, the family, selfhood, and one's own dreams resulted in some of the most compelling horror films of the last half century. In nearly every film, horror and humor are intertwined and integral to one another—Craven's bemused, dry chuckling at the absurdity of it all.

Making some sense of the absurdity, Shannon Blake Skelton's *Wes Craven: Interviews* (University of Mississippi Press, 2019) collects a substantive and comprehensive range of interviews that covers 35 years, from 1980-2015.

¹ Craven makes a version of this comment in an interview with Andrea Chase included in this volume.

The collection deftly arranges a mix of scholars, film journalists, and fansite writers ranging from Tony Williams to Tony Timpone. The portrait that emerges supports Craven's reputation as thoughtful, candid, funny, and generous in conversation and collaborative on the set. Casual fans or film scholars looking for new insights into Craven alike would do well with this book.

Skelton's introductory essay is breezy and engaging, while also exacting in the details. The essay touches on nearly every point in Craven's career, sketching connections and continuities among the interviews over the decades. Skelton gives readers a full accounting of Craven's body of work, including feature films, television, a novel, a comic book series, and his executive producer imprimatur that fostered the careers of directors like Patrick Lussier² and Alexandre Aja. Skelton identifies several of the most consistent themes in Craven's work—dreams, family, trauma—as signposts for the reader to take note of Craven's evolving perspectives as the interviews move through the years. The egalitarianism in Skelton's selection is one of the book's real strengths. Lee Goldberg and David McDonnell of *Fangoria* ask in a 1986 interview if Craven longs for interviewers from more “serious” outlets, to which Craven replies bluntly that he would like more attention from the mainstream critics, without losing touch with the “genre press” (31). It's fitting then that Skelton also includes two previously unpublished long interviews with the American Film Institute and *Fangoria*, which situates Craven in both ends of the film media industry. Skelton's balance of outlets ranging from academic journals to aintitcoolnews.com illustrates a director willing to give deep and engaging answers to any and all questions, and who appreciated his fans even as he pursued his ambitions for mainstream status and acceptance.

Craven was never reticent about giving interviews, and culling for a single volume must have been a massive challenge. Skelton's selections and arrangement allow Craven to give his own accounting of his artistic and professional intentions and ambitions, juxtaposed with contemporaneous evaluations of his work. The collection in sum packs an emotional punch. In the first interview, with Tony Williams in 1980, Craven tells his origin story as a first-time filmmaker reckoning with the impact of *Last House*. In the last, in 2015 with Jennifer Juniper Stratford, Craven tells his origin story again, this time reflecting on *Last House* from the vantage point of his long career, and his terminal cancer diagnosis (which he did not reveal at the time).

² Lussier was Craven's editor on eight films beginning with *New Nightmare* (1994) and ending with *Red Eye* (2005).

As with any good compilation of interviews, readers enjoy the benefit of hindsight. This collection is as interesting and useful for those unfamiliar with Craven's work outside of his notorious early films *The Last House on the Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), and the franchises of *Elm Street* and *Scream*, as it is for those (like me) obsessed with his complete corpus. The largest portion of interviews discuss *Last House*, *Hills*, *Nightmare*, and *Scream* from various vantage points during Craven's career. But Craven's underappreciated and less well-regarded films get ample attention. Several interviews discuss his television work, from movies-of-the-week like *Stranger in Our House* (1978) to episodic programs like *The Twilight Zone* revival (1985-1987) and *Nightmare Cafe* (1991). Others go in depth about such critical and commercial failures as *Deadly Friend* (1986) and *Cursed* (2004). In the case of the former, we see Craven assessing his work at the time, not knowing what will be the result. Reflecting on *Cursed* with Marc Shapiro after its disastrous post-production and release, Craven is brutally honest, and pained. Of the endless rewrites and reshoots, he said, "There's so much I could have done with my time...I just felt that the film was eating up my life" (108). It is instructive for analyzing Craven's films to read his optimistic pre- and rueful post-assessments, the intended treatment versus the what-might-have-beens.

The ample biographical details and discussions of Craven's key themes offers new opportunities to think and rethink about his filmography. It seems perversely fitting that Craven, who grew up in a repressive religious household that forbade all movies except for Disney, and who would later immerse himself in international arthouse cinema, would marry the two scenes with his interest in folk tales. Many of Craven's early films have folk tales at their foundation, from the Per Töre fable that inspired Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960), which Craven reimagined as *Last House*, to the Sawney Bean legend that inspired *The Hills Have Eyes*, and even to the "Beauty & the Beast" themes added to *Swamp Thing* (1982). It's fitting, then, that Freddy Krueger became Craven's indelible original contribution to modern folk tales. Even more fitting, cinema itself, the "dreams we created to help allay our fears"³ forms the mythology of the *Scream* franchise, a narrative layered from the "real-life" Woodsboro murders, dramatized in the character Gail Weathers's tabloid book, and then diffused in media through the films-within-films *Stab* franchise.

There are several interesting bits of trivia for aficionados looking for deep cuts. For example, Craven tells Alan Jones in a 1982 interview that he

³ Craven expresses this sentiment in various forms in interviews throughout the collection. Skelton and the University Press of Mississippi wisely include it as a pull quote on the back cover of the book.

requested and fought for \$200,000 to shoot a supernatural-themed stinger ending for *Deadly Blessing* (1981). That ending, which rather definitively eliminates the ambiguity over whether the murders of *Deadly Blessing* are in fact supernatural, has been lambasted over the years as supremely goofy by fans and critics alike. In a commentary track for *Deadly Blessing*, recorded in 2007 for an Australian DVD release,⁴ Craven claims the ending was imposed by the studio, who couldn't bear the aforementioned ambiguity in the original ending. Which version is true? Was 1982 Craven high on his flashy new ending, or politicking with the interviewer to avoid criticizing the studio? Was 2007 Craven being blunt about hating an ending that was forced on him, or was he passing the buck?

For another, potentially significant example, Skelton includes one of Craven's final interviews, a short exchange with the rapper, actor, and producer R.A. the Rugged Man.⁵ The chat veers toward the unsubstantial, until R.A. casually asks Craven if Freddy Krueger was inspired in part by the child killer killed by a mob in *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931). Craven seems interested, and says no one has ever asked him that question before, but that there would likely be some unconscious connection, as he'd seen *M* by the time he started writing *Nightmare*. This is an interesting thought, one that offers new contexts in which to analyze Craven's thematic focus on the family and the community as a source of horror. Moving further, several of his films feature brother-sister pairings in which the sister is the stronger of the two, such as Brenda and Bobby (and Juno and Mars) in *The Hills Have Eyes*, Ellie and Jimmy in *Cursed*, and Sidney and Dewey in *Scream*.⁶ Craven had two siblings whom I have never seen mentioned in an interview. He was upfront about the impact of his upbringing on his artistic preoccupation with family and trauma. One could wonder if more of his biography influenced the particular family dynamics he explored.

These examples and others abound in Skelton's collection, which illuminates Craven's filmography on its own and in concert with other publications and DVD commentaries. It is a welcome and significant addition to a small but sure to be growing body of critical work. As the generation of great American horror directors rapidly passes—Craven's death preceded George A. Romero, Tobe Hooper, and Larry Cohen in quick succession—this

⁴ The commentary was included in the 2012 Blu-ray release by Shout! Factory.

⁵ Exploitation film fans with tastes similar to my own will be familiar with Mr. Rugged Man's work as co-producer, co-writer, and actor in Frank Henenlotter's underappreciated *Bad Biology* (2008).

⁶ I suppose one might also include Angela and Peter, the incestuous siblings of Craven's pornographic film, *Angela, The Fireworks Woman* (1975).

book will be a crucial resource to horror and auteur studies, as well as an engaging introduction to fans and students.

— Will Dodson

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