00:00:00 Intro Music

00:00:06 Hi and welcome to Forgotten film club. We're your hosts, Sarah, Hallie and John. Hallie and I are friends from the Internet who met for the first time in real life in a cabin in the woods in Wisconsin. And somehow it wasn't the plot of a horror film.

00:00:20 I know John from college. And Hallie and John have never met, so we're just a bunch of people who like movies, chatting online and sharing your thoughts with you about films that were forgotten from the 80s, 90s, and aughts that we don't think should be forgotten. But do you need a few key improvements.

00:00:36 The setting is swampy. The cast is award-winning. That's right, it's 2000’s, The Gift, co-written by Billy Bob Thornton, Cate Blanchett is Annie Wilson, a single mom of three brothers supporting herself as a psychic in a small swamp town, presumably in the South. I can only presume that because the accents are a mess. And yes, that includes Cate Blanchett, who is otherwise pretty good at accents. We learn that Annie's oldest is struggling at school, presumably because it's been a rough year since his father passed away. Principal Wayne, played by Greg Kinnear, recommends therapy. And Annie, whose job it is to listen to people's problems all day long, seems very reluctant to even consider the thought. While in the principal's office, she meets his fiancé, Jessica, played by Katie Holmes, who seems to be a total snob. She asks for a psychic reading, though it feels like a criticism when she says it, and Annie immediately gets a vision of Katie's foot in a corpse like state. We then cut to an auto shop where we meet Giovanni Ribisi. He’s playing Buddy, a very sweet but troubled mechanic.

00:01:42 Later that night, Donnie Barksdale, played by Keanu Reeves, shows up at Annie's door. This is scary because we've met his wife Valerie, played by Hilary Swank earlier in the movie, and learned that he's a cheater and a wife beater. Keanu playing against type! At first, she won't let him into the house, but she talks to him through the door. When he insists he needs to talk to her about something that's happened to Valerie, she lets him inside, where he confronts Annie for speaking negatively about him to his wife, because of course he does. Then he threatens her with a voodoo doll he's made of her. The next day, Valerie returns to see Annie. Donnie shows up attacking both her and Annie.

00:02:20 Shortly thereafter, Annie is visited by the ghost of her grandmother. She warns her the storm is coming, prompting Annie to see more violent images. We cut to a party at the Country Club, where Annie sees Jessica hooking up with Gary Cole in the bathroom while Wayne hangs out by himself. And he doesn't mention this to Wayne, who chats with her outside and casually asks if she had any premonitions about her husband's death. She says, no, nothing certain, just some bad dreams.

00:02:48 When Annie picks her kids up from the neighbor’s after the party, she notices her house has been broken into. Telling the kids to wait outside, Annie goes in to investigate. The TV's blaring a televangelist show. Someone has written Satan on her bed with psychic cards. This seems like the work of Donnie Barksdale. But of course, the cops don't believe Annie. Valerie has already mentioned that Donnie's kind of a big deal around town. Shortly thereafter, Annie receives a phone call from Donnie where he threatens to murder her children. At church Annie’s friend, Linda, tells her that Jessica has gone missing. Later that same day, as Annie makes a cake, she sends her middle child over to the neighbor’s to get icing. Donnie sees them on the street and threatens him, grabbing the boy's arm through his truck's window. Buddy witnesses this and intervenes by smashing Denny's windshield with a crowbar, fulfilling one of Annie’s earlier visions. Donnie pulls a gun on Buddy, who begs him to shoot him.

00:03:40 This may be a good time to mention that the film’s director has seemed to instruct Giovanni Ribisi to chew the scenery in absolutely every shot he's in. After this very violent display, Annie decides to keep closer tabs on her children. Shortly thereafter, JK Simmons, playing the sheriff, and Jessica’s Dad show up at Annie's house looking for anything she knows about Jessica's disappearance, psychic or otherwise. Jessica Dad agrees to a psychic reading, but all Annie sees is a split rail fence with pillars and some flowers. She tells Jessica's dad she can't concentrate and can't help him. That night, Annie has more spooky dreams. These dreams continue into a waking vision where she sees Jessica chained up and frankly looking pretty dead. Annie reports this to the sheriff, who of course thinks it's complete bullshit.

00:04:29 And just to make sure you're aware of exactly what type of man he is, he's drinking coffee and complaining to a subordinate that there are no eclairs in his box of Krispy Kreme Donuts. The sheriff tells Annie she didn't see anything definitive enough for him to investigate, so she describes to him a fiddler on a pond. In her dream, she says that the fiddler is not the culprit, but she wonders who he could be and more importantly, who his neighbors are. The sheriff says the fiddler sounds like Tommy Lee Ballard, who shares a property line with Donnie Barksdale. Valerie lets the sheriff on to the property while Donnie is away fishing. They've told her they're conducting a routine search of all the ponds in the county. The most interesting thing they find in the pond is an old bike, but unfortunately they don't get out of there in time. Before Donnie returns home, the sheriff notices some scratches on Donnie's arm, which Donnie says he got while killing a stray cat. I guess he thought this was a good excuse that would make him not look like a raving lunatic, but of course it makes him come across as a complete psychopath.

00:05:28 The Sheriff reiterates that the search is routine, but this does not stop Donnie from punching Annie in the stomach. Thankfully, the deputies have continued their search this whole time. Sadly, they do recover Jessica's body. Donnie is swiftly arrested, and we cut to Annie going to meet with the prosecutor who is -- plot twist -- Gary Cole. The prosecutor tells Annie that the forensic evidence is solid, but he's concerned that the defense will poke holes in the fact that a psychic helped the police recover the body. He asks Annie if she had an affair with Donnie, and this is all just bad blood, meaning that she knew about the murder from her affair with Donnie and his all trying to get back at him. But really, instead of coming forward with cold, hard facts, she's going to say it's all psychic vision. OK? Anyway, we cut to the trial where an eyewitness testifies to seeing Donnie and Jessica fight in a bar parking lot on the night of her disappearance. The defense then questions the sheriff on working with Annie, and the jury seems suspicious of the whole psychic thing.

00:06:26 Hecklers threaten Annie outside the courthouse, while Buddy, who it is now clear with sexually abused by his father, begs for help. But Annie just has nothing to give right now. Oh, Annie, it's too bad you're not a huge believer in therapy, because you should probably be making some referrals at this point. But unfortunately, she does not do that, and is called In the middle of the night by Buddy's mother, who says that he's about to kill his father. We then cut to an incredibly violent scene, and I'm going to be honest, I'm pretty much skipping over this part in the recap because the point is that Annie is not able to stop Buddy from maiming his father. Buddy is then sent away to a mental hospital. In the next scene, the defense attorney asks Annie to guess how many fingers he is holding up behind his back. She can't guess because that's not how psychic visions work. He also mentions that she couldn't even prevent her own husband's death. Once again, not how the visions work, dude.

00:07:14 On the witness stand, Donnie admits to striking Jessica when she tried to break their affair off. She fell backwards and hit her head on her own car. He tried to take her to the hospital, but on the way there, she said she felt better and wanted to return to the bar because somebody might recognize her at the hospital. He basically admits to being a total trash human and claims that doesn't mean he wasn't framed for murder. Things escalate into a screaming match between Donnie and the prosecutor. He's found guilty, but not before he publicly accuses Annie of being a witch. Valerie shows up again, looking for a reading. She feels lost without Donnie, even though she knows he sucks. She tells Annie she also feels guilty for being glad that Jessica is dead, and he gets a cloudy look on her face. She refuses to tell Valerie what she saw, saying the vision is unclear. That night, while running a bath, Annie has a vision again. She's haunted by Jessica's animated corpse, who seems to be very angry with Annie for some reason, perhaps for accusing the wrong person of her murder. In the morning, Annie goes to visit Wayne, who is distraught over Jessica's death. She staves off his advances, both because he's clearly going through it and because she still feels married to her deceased husband. Annie told Wayne that Donnie did not kill Jessica. Wayne asks if she knows who did, but she says she can't see clearly. She asks for a piece of Jessica's clothing to help her get a clearer vision. We cut to Annie sitting alone at her table with her cards, where her visions become much clearer. She goes to the prosecutor's home and tells him that Donnie is innocent. She cannot tell him who killed Jessica, but she does feel like someone will try to kill her. She also confronts the prosecutor for having an affair with Jessica as recently as the day before her murder. He tried unsuccessfully to bribe her. He then tells her she'd be safer if she left things alone. But she says she cannot let an innocent man be convicted of murder.

00:09:10 When Annie gets home, Buddy is waiting for her. Or at least he seems to be. He's in the yard when she drives in, but then disappears by the time she gets out of the car. Sensing that he could be dangerous, she calls the neighbor who is currently watching her boys and asks if they can all stay the night, and she leaves the house. She runs into Wayne. She asks if he's seen Buddy and he says Buddy is in a mental hospital. He then asks her to give him a psychic reading. When she can't get a clear vision, he suggests they go to the pond. Friendly reminder to never go to a second location. Thank you. At the ponds, Annie stumbles. When Wayne helps her up, she gets a vision of being struck with a flashlight. Then she sees Buddy's face and his visions intensify. She sees Jessica about to get into her car at the bar after having been brought back to it by Donnie. She seems to recognize someone in another car. Annie’s vision then clarifies to the point that she sees Wayne confront Jessica for cheating. She tries to break up with him, tossing her ring away and saying she's only marrying him to please her father. That's when he strangles her.

00:10:12 Back in the present, Annie claims to have seen nothing. Wayne obviously doesn't believe it. He says he wanted Annie to know the truth and that he's not really a killer—cue a ton of victim blaming—as she tries to fight back. Wayne strikes Annie with the flashlight. Buddy intervenes just as he is about to strike her again, saving Annie’s life together. Annie and Buddy put an unconscious Wayne into the trunk of her car. Buddy returns to town with Danny, but disappears when she goes inside to get the sheriff. She tries to explain everything to the sheriff, who was super nice now by the way, and definitely seems to believe all the psychic stuff 100%. He informs her that Buddy could not have helped her because he passed away at the hospital earlier that same day. Wow, this movie was sad. The end.

00:10:57 Wow, this movie was sad. The end. What a perfect ending.

00:11:02 I have to say, I thought it was a boring movie somehow, but reading this recap, I'm shocked that I found it to be boring, because a whole lot of shit happens in this, and it feels like it should have been more interesting.

00:11:14 I think that's what was my impression too. It took a while to pick up. It was a very bucolic, yeah. It was a very calm and bucolic movie for the most part, except for all the ghost parts and the domestic violence parts. I think Keanu Reeves was the scariest part of this movie.

00:11:29 I wasn't sure who Keanu Reeves was going to play. It was actually kind of a surprise to me, and I didn't recognize his voice. When he was behind the window curtain, when he knocked at the door, I actually didn't recognize his voice for a minute. And then once she pulled us and I was like, Oh my God, it's him.

00:11:46 Keanu Reeves kind of had this whole entire group of sound effects that always follow him everywhere in this movie. It's like it was like you heard the sound, you heard his car, before he ever heard him. It was like Jaws. Like you, you heard Jaws before you saw Jaws, and he was the most terrifying part of the movie. Like it…it’s like it was like a force of nature. And this is like early 2000s Keanu when everybody thought that he was a bad actor.

00:12:15 OK, can we briefly address the Keanu Reeves is a bad actor myth? I don't understand where it comes from and what specifically they're pointing to.

00:12:26 I mean when I was a kid. I was always directed towards his period pieces. I think that Keanu Reeves was never a bad actor. I just think. I just think that he was misused in a lot of different projects.

00:12:45 I think so too. One of my favorite performances of his was actually in the Steve Martin *Parenthood* but he's but he's a silly guy in it but…but then you take the layers back and keep this heartfelt caring actually really wonderful guy.

00:13:03 He's great in *My Own Private Idaho* and there is no element of comedy in that movie. You know, like there's no Keanu Reeves Stoner guy energy there.

00:13:14 Yeah, I think it's they just it's one of those things where…I don't know if they still do it as much…but every single A-list actor or actress back in the 90s and 2000s where they were all, they all had to have range. No matter who they were they all had to be put in…in the period pieces. And or they had to be put in the things that they shouldn't be playing…like Nicole Kidman when she played a janitor at a high school in the *Human Stain* or that movie where Charlize Theron like looking like Charlize Theron plays a coal miner. So it's just you have these…like back then you just have these wild castings where it's just it's and then…and then, you know, and then we all kind of realize, like, no, just don't push these people into natural shapes. Like give them their, you know, give them movies that highlight their strengths.

I'm just trying to think like the casting, the casting and this, like this is an amazing cast. Like everybody took a huge pay cut just to work with Sam Raimi. Like it was like a it was like a thing for everybody. Like, that was why everybody was around.

00:14:15 The scene that got me so out of it that I almost laughed at, just out of, like what was…pulled up to the kid in the truck. And is harassing her son. And then Giovanni Ribisi's character comes out and gets the crowbar and bashes the windows. I'm like and there's it seems almost like the whole community has been like that's just how we act, like the fact that that was so not as much of an issue as you. That would be that would the part where it was like, OK, the writing kind of fell here.

00:14:50 I think that's an interesting point in the larger sense that I don't feel any community in this movie. Like I don't feel like they're living in a town, and I know it's trying to be Southern Gothic, but Southern Gothic is not like, and then everyone's an asshole but we still go to church. Like there has to be some kind of fabric of society that you're subverting and it just feels like none of these people live in a society.

00:15:15 I think that for me it's more unforgivable for a movie to be just middle of the middle of the road ok than it is to be bad.

00:15:24 I didn't know why I was watching this movie other than it was the assignment for this podcast. I think it was my least – if you gave me a checklist, like elements of horror, violence against women, childhood sexual abuse, it feels like the stakes should be so high. And yet. I just feel like nothing's happening in this movie. I never really feel like she's in danger. Even when she's in danger, I don't feel like there's really any mystery. I'm like, where is the mystery? Everything feels like you can see it coming from miles away.

00:16:00 I think that the idea of the community is such a great point, though, of how it really feels like these siloed partnerships and siloed friendships, and it just nothing felt communal enough. There were moments where it was on a right track where I was getting interested, and then there were moments where something would happen that would almost be funny. You know what? You know?

00:16:25 And I mean, I guess Jerry should have spoken in this podcast too. He says like does this kind of feel like a made for TV movie?

00:16:35 Yeah. It felt like a made for TV movie also, just kind of the way it was shot because it kind of had that grainy Hallmark look. This felt like it was sort of a direct to video release.

00:16:47 I felt bad for Katie Holmes in this movie. Like you could kind of just feel like she was trying to step out of that Joey Potter role. And this was like a big screen opportunity for that. And they gave her, like, essentially no character. She's basically – talk about gratuitous violence against women – a prop for the entirety of this movie. It's so gross.

00:17:07 When she was making this movie, she was saying like, you know, I'm, I'm trying to convince my parents about the nudity. In this movie that, you know, the nudity is necessary, and this is the next step in my career. And it's like in the movie, it’s so sad because the nudity wasn't necessary. It's like, it's so…and it's so strange because Paramount Classics, not Paramount, but Paramount Classics was a distributor. You know, it's not in existence anymore. But that's where they gave a lot of like very low budget. Kind of higher risk movies that distributor. *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The Virgin Suicides* were released by Paramount Classics. So it's just really, and I remember reading like Sam Raimi in the interview about it, like he was kind of, he was actually kind of mystified about, you know, like why the lower budget. And why the Paramount Classics release? I feel like they were also trying to do like. Like the Green Mile type thing here. I don't know what this is before the Green Mile but like with the kind of bringing these supernatural powers into the real world. Yeah, I mean, it just didn't quite click. Um, I think that. I think the tone like Sam Raimi. I think him toning things down was probably the. Biggest mistake anybody made.

00:18:24 As somebody who's only dipped a toe into the water of horror. Shout out to my very kind ex for helping me get over that fear. And I would say that if you're going to go horror, never go subtle. Who is like, sign me up for subtle horror?

00:18:38 I don't know who told him. I don't know if it was completely his decision, like you need to tone things down, like I just don't know. If you ever watch Cabin, if you ever, not *Cabin in the Woods*. Like, you know the *Evil Dead* movies, it's or you know everybody's seen the Sam Raimi Spiderman movies. Um. You just don't really see any of that here. Like I think the closest you get is like the end where it's like, you know it's you have the Thunder, you have the thunder and lightning with that, with no rain for like half an hour and like it just emphasized the. You know, like the like the dramatic de neu ma. You know Greg Kinnear and Buddy and her and. Yeah, like that's the only thing. That's the only part of the movie that really felt kind of like. Nineties 2000s, dramatic, Sam Raimi.

00:19:26 I think horror needs to be specific and In line with what we're doing in this movie, right? It has to be specific, and you got to go or you got to not do it and suspense. His own thing, right? Like you can have horror with suspense, but like, again, the specifics of it. We also haven't talked about how she can see dead people.

00:19:46 Well, she had a Cinderella moment. At the end, because she it's the rules of this movie. I know they tried to establish rules of this movie that when she sees dead people, they are corporeal, and she can touch them. Like, you know, they established that her grandma gave her oranges or something. OK, you can touch these people and they can give you stuff. And because at one point she gives him her handkerchief. And then at the end, he gives to the anchor handkerchief back to her, and after she finds out like, oh he's dead, she pulls up the handkerchief and it's like the handkerchief is in her pocket again. It was like, yeah, it's like a Cinderella moment where it's like, oh, it's just, I still have the slipper. It was real.

00:20:27 Sam Raimi, like he had just done for the love of the game right before this, you know, and he's also most famous, you know, for *Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead 2*. So this is kind of an unusual movie for him to do. He really tried hard. He knew that he was going in with him with some horror elements, but he wanted to ground everything and make it believable for the audience. I guess also out of respect for, you know, the fact that this is also loosely based off of Billy Bob Thornton's mother. Billy Bob Thornton never really talked much about making this more right in this movie, but he did. Over the years he has given a lot of interviews about his mom. Being psychic, you know, he credits her with predicting like his success in Hollywood. They grew up like he grew up in like a shack with no electricity and no plumbing in Arkansas. With his mom and a bunch of siblings and his dad who died early, but it seems like he don't know it's. It seems like he put a lot of a lot of his mom in into the Cate Blanchett character, though.

00:21:26 So what would we change?

00:21:29 So the good bones of this movie. There are some good bones here. Is the fact that this is a single mom and this a single mother in the South. Who is a small-town psychic. Who gets caught up in a in a in a big murder whodunnit.

00:21:48 I just my question is, does this movie have good bones without Cate Blanchett propping it up? Like if it just is that an interesting enough structure without an extraordinarily talented person?

00:22:02 I think like a single…I think a single mom psychic, like that's haunted, that's haunted by like you know, the ghosts of murdered socialites is…that that sounds pretty interesting to me.

00:22:14 Well then I think, I think run with that. But then I think we need more murders. It maybe they're just like. Cold cases or I don't know what, but yeah, there's not enough happening. Or maybe if it was like a serial killer, Something like that.

00:22:29 Make this into a *Conjuring* movie. No, seriously, it's like, it's this movie want this. You know the storyline wants to be The Conjuring. Like a *Conjuring* type movie, but it's like they were trying to ground it too much and it just took all of the all of the joy and fun out of a ghost psychic movie. It's like psychic ghost movies should be fun. And scary.

00:22:56 In that same vein, I would take out the profanity. I. II would almost. Camp it more, take out any of the F bombs and make this more appropriate for kids and really lean into the. “*Halloween*iness” of it. The red herring I wish they had kind of used further was the Hilary Swank. And then when she goes to Cate Blanchett again, I'm going to say the actual name too. When she goes to create Blanchett is it's like I'm having these bad thoughts about doing bad things and I'm like, oh, maybe it's her. So they gave that I guess is a red herring, but and then the payoff of it with Giovanni Ribisi. Doing the killing. But not really to me. Didn't quite work.

00:23:42 I mean. Who would we cast though? Like in in a totally different version of this movie with the same setting.

00:23:48 I think in the same setting? Um, they should probably have more people of color. Just in general. And my husband Jerry was watching this with me. And I said, “this is Savannah GA right?” And it’s like yeah. Like where all the black characters. And he says, “Well, there was a witness. You know, there was, there was one of her customers and there was a, you know, that guy in the witness stand.” And it’s like, ok.

00:24:16 Especially for Georgia. We're in the South, like, hello.

00:24:19 And I think, I think we always go, I think we always go with Keke Palmer for everything nowadays, right? She does need more roles.

00:24:28 Yeah, this is I would say this was my least fave too. This one was. He didn't know what Bennett wanted to sit in. We call it the $5 bin choice.

00:24:39 Yeah, like I thought it was promising because it's, you know, 52% on Rotten Tomatoes with the Sam Raimi, Cate Blanchett, Keanu Reeves, Hilary Swank. It's not. It sounds like that's so good on paper. And I just want, I just, I mainly just wanted to see, like, what went wrong. I think this movie was trying to say something. It was trying to. It was trying to be about something bigger. But. I think they're trying to do misogyny and adversity and. Yeah, I think. I think you're trying to do the message about like misogyny and powerful women not being believed. And it just came out muddled.

00:25:21 That’s it for Forgotten Film Club. Join us next month for more clairvoyance, but more hijinks too. We're going to be talking about the largely forgotten and only available on a YouTube rip of a VHS 1990 movie, *In the Spirit,* starring Marlo Thomas. And Elaine May, featuring cameo appearances by Olympia Dukakis and Melanie Griffith and Peter Falk in a supporting role. See you next time.

00:25:49 Outro Music