

Knives Out (2019)



The wealthy Thrombey family
in happier days. (c)
Lionsgate

Director-screenwriter Rian Johnson gives us an old fashioned who-dunit complete with a quirky detective (actually two detectives, counting a police lieutenant who simply represents authority) and a room full of characters, all of whom have motives that could have led to the murder in question. This is a stylish brain teaser certain to make you forget your own troubles for a while, although it does lift up the issue so troubling to many, that of immigrants.

On the night of his 85th birthday famous crime novelist Harlan Thrombey (Christopher Plummer) apparently committed suicide in his spooky Gothic Revival mansion, his throat-slit body having been discovered the next morning. The kind of person he was is established at the beginning of the film when we see a close-up of his coffee mug on which is emblazoned, "My house. My rules. My coffee."

Officially in charge of the investigation is police Lieutenant Elliott (Lakeith Stanfield), but also present is the famous private detective Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig) who has been hired by person or persons unknown. More suspicious than the Lieutenant, he is not so sure that Thrombey died by his own hand, the manner of death being by knife.

The family that had gathered for the birthday party consists of eldest daughter Linda Drysdale (Jamie Lee Curtis) and her listless husband Richard (Don Johnson); youngest son Walt (Michael Shannon), who managed Thrombey's lucrative publishing house; daughter-in-law (Toni Collette), widow of a deceased son. Showing up for the reading of the will but absent from the funeral is grandson Ransom (Chris Evans), eager to collect his due from the will. Not related by blood, but "considered one of the family," as all of the above assure her, is Marta Cabrera ([Ana de Armas](#)), Harlan Thrombey's caretaker. She had been serving him so faithfully that she had become his confidante after the old man had grown disgusted with his greedy family.

When at the will reading the startling news is that Harlan has left everything to Marta, the warm feelings toward the beneficiary quickly evaporate. Marta is as surprised as they are. She is soon in danger, and we learn that she actually knows how the old man had died, though by no means everything of the motivation or the identity of the person responsible. It will be up to Benoit Blanc, of course, to work through all the facts and motivations. He calls the mystery "a case with a hole in the middle. A donut." As matters become more complicated, he says that it is "a donut hole within a donut hole."



An unknown person hires P.I. Benoit Blanc to investigate the alleged suicide. (c) Lionsgate

I have never been good at figuring out who "dun-its," so I was more like a back seat passenger going along for the ride, but found it an agreeable trip. The critical remarks that some of the family members made about immigrants being unwelcome make the film relevant to present reality. And there is humor in the family claiming Marta is "one of the family" when they seem confused about where she came from, one saying "Uruguay," and another "Brazil." I suspect that neither person knew that the two countries spoke different languages! Apparently none of them has really talked with her in an attempt to get to know her as a person. Another draw of the film is the bizarre mansion and its contents, the place filled with paintings, massive furniture, statues and artifacts, the most prominent being an art piece incorporating in circular formation dozens of knives, swords, axes, and cleavers. The art director must have had fun gathering all the showy props.

You don't have to be a crime mystery fan to enjoy this "donut hole within a donut hole" of a film.

This review will be in the January issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.