

Mama (2012)

Rated R. Our ratings: V-6 ; L-3 ; S/N .1 Running time: 1 hour 40 min.

*If my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will take me up.*

Psalms 27.10

Actress Jessica Chastain is on a roll this year, slowly developing her maternal instincts.

donning a dark wig and sporting a tattoo as Annabel, a rock band member who unwillingly becomes

the protector of the two nieces her lover Lucas has taken under his wing. Several years earlier after murdering his wife and several coworkers, the distraught brother of Lucas had disappeared into the woods with his two young daughters. In a prologue we see him bringing the girls to a cabin. Standing behind the little girls he points his pistol at them. There are tears in his eyes, but before he can pull the trigger something springs up from behind. We cannot see it, but the girls do.

Jump ahead five years: the girls are found alone in a cabin. The girls' Uncle Lucas (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) had never given up in searching for them—or their remains. Everyone wonders how they had survived. Victoria and Lilly (Megan Charpentier and Isabelle Nelisse, two wonderful child actresses!) are

almost feral, especially the younger Lilly because she had been a baby with no language skills, whereas Victoria had been old enough to talk when they had disappeared. Placed under the care of psychiatrist Dr. Dreyfuss (Daniel Kash), the girls remain fearful of everyone, including their Uncle Lucas. It will take a lot of patience and love to restore them to any semblance of normality.

However, Lucas' sister wants to take custody of the children because she believes that Lucas, with his musician's life style and lack of space in his cramped apartment, cannot provide the stability the girls need. This is where Dr. Dreyfuss enters in, fearful that he will no longer be able to study the girls because the aunt lives on the other side of the country. He offers to Lucas and Annabel the free use of a house built by his institute for the study of children, provided they agree to allow him continual access to the children.

Lucas readily agrees, genuinely loving his disturbed nieces, but Annabel is less than enthusiastic. Relishing her freedom, this is something she had not bargained for when she began her relationship with her lover.

As the days pass Victoria makes great progress, reaching out to both Lucas and Annabel for love and support. Not so with Lilly, who continues to move around on all fours, looking very much like a spider or crab, and recoiling from any attempt to touch her. And there is a dark, flitting presence we see from time to time that apparently cares for them, but which can be quite deadly. Through flashbacks we learn that this is the ghost of a mother who many decades earlier had done a horrific thing. The disturbed ghost had preserved the lives of Victoria and Lilly so that they had come to call her Mama. In their new home Victoria is able to transfer her allegiance to Annabel and Lucas, but not Lilly, who had been too young to form a human relationship when she and her sister were taken by their father to the cabin. Mama has followed the girls, so we see

her interacting with them, unbeknownst to Lucas and Annabel.

Dr. Dreyfuss uncovers the story from the 19th century of a deranged mother who had run away from a mental institution near the cabin and had done a terrible thing to herself and her baby. Through a series of horrific events the film climaxes to the point where Annabel, her maternal instincts thoroughly aroused and transforming her into a caring person, must put herself at great risk to save the girls.

Director Andy Muschietti has given us a truly chilling horror tale that harks back to films of the genre's old tradition, that we live in a universe that has a moral order. Thus this is a far cry from the nihilistic blood and gore flicks that have almost taken over the genre today. In the light of Psalm 27, we might ask, does the Lord work through the dark and tortured creatures lurking in the fringes of ordinary life?

For Reflection/Discussion

Contains spoilers.

1. How does this film compare to other horror films? Especially the blood and gore series wherein the villain keeps coming back to commit more mayhem? How does Andy Muschietti's film show at the end that his worldview is one of moral order, rather than nihilism?
2. And yet, given this worldview, how do we see that it is realistic, avoiding soft sentimentalism? (Think of the fate of Lilly.)
3. Describe how the depiction of the anguished ghost follows a traditional view of why ghosts "hang around," rather than moving on.
4. How does Annabel change during the course of the story? How is she the person of grace, rather than Dr. Dreyfuss? (What is

the doctor's main motive for providing the home for the girls?)