

Get Out's paranoid godfather: why Stepford Wives author Ira Levin still gives us nightmares

[telegraph.co.uk/films/0/get-outs-paranoid-godfather-stepford-wives-author-ira-levin/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/get-outs-paranoid-godfather-stepford-wives-author-ira-levin/)

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The racially-themed paranoid thriller Get Out finesses a great deal of up-to-the-minute social commentary into its setup – including the mentionitis that afflicts white liberals about the support they'd have given for a third Obama term.

But the genre elements of this horror satire adhere to more classic formulae, as many reviewers have pointed out. Writer-director Jordan Peele has acknowledged that Bryan Forbes's The Stepford Wives (1975) is one of his favourite films, particularly for the way it deals with social issues about gender, and you can see the template he's derived from it – a WASP-y New England enclave, all manicured lawns and unnerving smiles, hiding something deeply amiss.

Even in the mobile-phone age, some plot points are carried through wholesale – the business of car keys being withheld to trap the main character at the end is pure Stepford.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/K9su2d0WM2I>

Insidious normalcy is the backdrop both of these films have in common, and the stock-in-trade of Ira Levin, who wrote The Stepford Wives in 1972. It was his fourth novel, and the

third to be adapted for film, over a nearly 50-year career which made Levin *the* go-to writer for shivery suspicion in aspirational American settings.

Levin debuted in 1953 with the Edgar-Award-winning thriller *A Kiss Before Dying*, the story of a handsome, psychopathic war veteran which has been filmed twice – by Gerd Oswald in 1956, and James Dearden in 1991. He fastened onto his parallel calling as a playwright in the years that followed, concocting such fare as *Critic's Choice* (1960), a hit comedy about the dilemma a theatre critic faces when his second wife gets a dreadful play staged on Broadway.

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Mia Farrow
and John
Cassavetes
in
*Rosemary's
Baby*
Credit: Rex

It was *Rosemary's Baby* that made its author a household name when it hit the shelves in 1967. Before publication, horror impresario William Castle bought the rights at galley stage, and wanted to direct the film for Paramount. Robert Evans, the studio's new head of production, bribed him into settling for a producing role, seeing it as a perfect match for the stylistic approach of Roman Polanski, who turned it into one of the definitive American horror films of the 1960s.

Even before his sinuously macabre film opened, the book benefited from word-of-mouth and saturation marketing to sell a whopping four million copies – a trick Evans would repeat later (fivefold) with *The Godfather*.

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The
*Stepford
Wives*
(1975)

In fact, *Get Out* feels just as indebted to *Rosemary's Baby* as it is to *The Stepford Wives*, especially when you consider some of its late-breaking twists. (Minor spoilers follow!). There's a little homage to Levin's book when the grandfather of Allison Williams's character, glimpsed in a creepy infomercial, introduces himself as Roman: this is surely not a nod to Polanski, but to Roman Castevet, the duplicitous next-door-neighbour, of markedly similar age and appearance, who was played by Sidney Blackmer in the film.

Peele says he grew up in Manhattan just a few blocks from The Dakota, the looming Upper

West Side co-op apartment block where Rosemary's Baby was shot. (It was also where John Lennon was shot, in the other sense of shot.) "When I was younger," Peele told Forbes magazine about Polanski's film, "it was actually a little too close to home[....] It freaked me out more than I could appreciate it."



The Dakota Building, as seen in the opening credits of Rosemary's Baby

Taken as a whole, Levin's work resonates not just for its ingenuity – Rosemary's Baby is plotted with a crossword-compiler's devious wit – but for the paranoid consistency of his vision. He likes hearty, all-American male characters – the killer in A Kiss Before Dying is the first of these – who can't be trusted for toffee.

Guy Woodhouse in Rosemary's Baby, willing to let Satan impregnate his wife for a career boost, might be one of the most despicable figures in all fiction: he could certainly go toe-to-toe with Noah Cross in Chinatown for this honour.

As with both Rosemary's Baby and The Stepford Wives, the twist in Levin's long-running 1978 Broadway thriller Deathtrap – filmed by Sidney Lumet in 1982, and revived a few years back in the West End – involves a conspiracy against the cornered heroine, by men.

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Gregory
Peck in
The
Boys
from
Brazil
Credit:
Rex

Levin, who died in 2007, also liked to push his satirical conceits as far into the realm of science fiction as he could plausibly manage. His third novel, *A Perfect Day*, is a slick update of *Brave New World* about a technocratic dystopia. His fifth, *The Boys from Brazil*, imagines escaped Nazi Josef Mengele (Gregory Peck in the 1978 film) attempting to create a kind of Fourth Reich using genetic clones of Hitler.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/8AQ2GITw7x4>

And he was obsessed with very tall buildings, and falling off them. And lifts. The murder in *A Kiss Before Dying*, carefully planned in its first third, involves the 14-storey plunge of a pregnant heiress down the service shaft of a municipal office block, made to look like suicide. Terry Gionoffrio, fellow resident of “the Bramford” in *Rosemary’s Baby*, similarly plunges to her death through a window.

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Ira
Levin
in
1982
Credit:
Getty

Levin still had an entire book left in him about high-rise foul play, which was duly optioned by Evans when he was back at Paramount in the 1990s. *Sliver*, essentially a Peeping Tom thriller for the CCTV age, is named after another infamous apartment block which beautiful blondes have a habit of fatally falling out of. Don’t try and repair the lift mechanism, either.

It worked better on the page than on screen, partly because of the lunkheaded casting of Sharon Stone as a damsel in distress, but the torpid, poorly-received Phillip Noyce film made it the last one to be derived directly from Levin – unless you count 2004’s loopy-spoofy remake of *The Stepford Wives*.

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Along with Michael Crichton (*The Andromeda Strain*, *Jurassic Park*, *Disclosure*, *Westworld*) and Robin Cook (*Coma*), Levin was one of the paranoid fantasists who kept readers’ pulses racing as they awaited their connecting flights in the late 20th century.

Fewer and fewer may read their books these days, but their conceits are like implants we can’t quite get rid of, buzzing occasionally with catchwords – “Stepford”, say – which carry on meaning something. As *Get Out* proves, they’re recurring nightmares – capable of shape-shifting into contemporary guise, and freaking us out afresh.