

# Depp thriller is well-crafted

David DiCerto/CNS

NEW YORK — Ranking right up there among the world's most baffling mysteries, like crop circles and how so many socks get lost in the laundry, is why Stephen King's shorter works make better movies than his novels. A few of his tomes have been successfully translated from page to screen; "The Shining" (1980) and "Misery" (1990) come to mind. But the effectiveness of those films had as much, if not more, to do with Stanley Kubrick (who directed the former) and Kathy Bates (who starred in the latter) than with the material itself.

Still, for every hit, viewers must endure the misery of a "Cujo" (1983) or "Maximum Overdrive" (1986). If past films are any indication of what's to come, when the final entry is made to the catalogue of King-inspired movies, those based on his short stories — "The Shawshank Redemption" (1994) and "Stand by Me" (1986) to name just two — will best stand the test of time. Add to that list "Secret Window" (Columbia), an absorbing, well-crafted psychological thriller based on King's novella "Secret Window, Secret Garden."

Trading in his beaded pirate braids for a threadbare bathrobe is Johnny Depp, starring as Mort Rainey, a successful author suffering from writer's block whose unmade-bed appearance fittingly mirrors the messiness of his life. Nearing the end of a painful divorce, Rainey has ensconced himself in his isolated lakefront cabin in the woods of upstate New York. Surviving on a steady diet of Doritos, cigarettes and bile, he spends most of his time asleep on a ratty couch, half-boozed and haunted by memories of him finding his wife (Maria Bello) and her lover (Timothy Hutton) together at a roadside motel.

During one of his marathon naps, Rainey is awakened by a stranger at his doorstep. The man introduces himself as John Shooter (John Turturro), a wacko from the Deep South with a broad-brimmed hat and a lazy drawl. He accuses Rainey of plagiarizing one of his short stories and demands restitution, stating menacingly, "I ain't quittin' 'til right gets put right." Rainey initially dismisses the hostile hick as a loon.

He attempts conciliation by zealously asserting that his story's publication in a pulp magazine predates the belligerent bumpkin's manuscript by several years. But Shooter won't be placated. He becomes increasingly insistent that Rainey change the story's ending, threaten-



Columbia Pictures/CNS

Johnny Depp and John Turturro star in a scene from the movie "Secret Window."

ing him with a twisted brand of backwater justice that includes cold-blooded murder, propelling the two men into a deadly game of cat and mouse. It all leads to a shaggy-dog ending, which, though you can see it coming a mile away, should provide for some interesting discussion among practitioners of intellectual property law.

Tautly paced with enough hair-raising suspense to keep viewers' cold sweat on a slow drip, the film avoids buckets of blood in favor of more muted chills. As written and directed by David Koepp, "Secret Window" owes more of its pedigree to the works of Hitchcock than to contemporary slasher flicks. Koepp keeps viewers' hearts pounding and palms sweaty by skillfully massaging their paranoia and by his astute understanding that when it comes to suspense, less is more.

The sustained suggestion of dread — a suspicious shadow, or an unnerving reflection in mirror — can unsettle a viewer far more effectively than cheap fright-house effects. In true Hitchcockian tradition, the drama is built on a bedrock understanding of psychology and man's fallen nature. The crimes committed all have as their root causes the deadly sins of envy and anger; though perhaps no vice plays a larger role in the slumbering scribe's undoing than the sin of sloth.

Much of the movie takes place in and around Rainey's cabin. Like Kubrick's "The Shining," Koepp's "Secret Window" explores the solitary — sometimes torturously so — process of writing. Both filmmakers take advantage of their claustropho-

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bic settings to show how isolation can lead to madness. Both films are essentially studies of men in confined spaces slowly losing touch with reality.

But like Jack Nicholson's unhinged performance in "The Shining," Depp's presence elevates the story above just a guy-in-a-house-going-crazy movie. Coming on the coattails of the cockeyed Capt. Jack Sparrow in "Pirates of the Caribbean," some moviegoers may feel Depp runs the risk of being pigeonholed in quirky character parts. But his Rainey daze brilliantly conveys the novelist's descent into depression and dementia. No other actor can mug his way through a performance with such grace. Equally worthy of mention is Turturro, whose measured malevolence as the riled rube is nothing short of chilling.

You might just want to check out the scary view from this "Secret Window."

Due to recurring gory violence, a discreet fleeting sexual encounter, some crude language and profanity, the USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

DiCerto is on the staff of the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

## FilmCapsules

NEW YORK (CNS) — The following are capsule reviews of movies recently reviewed by the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

### 'AGENT CODY BANKS 2: DESTINATION LONDON'

Stale sequel to 2003's "Agent Cody Banks" which, this time around, finds the junior spy (Frankie Muniz) in an English boarding school for musical prodigies in order to thwart the evil designs of his former CIA instructor (Keith Allen), who plans to use stolen top-secret, mind-control technology to take over the world. Frequent action violence and some crude humor. The USCCB classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

### 'ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND'

A love story about an introverted loner (Jim Carrey) who has all his memories of his former girlfriend (Kate Winslet) erased from his brain after learning that she had recently undergone the same procedure, only to discover midway through the operation that he still loves her and ends up fighting to retain precious recollections of their relationship. Implied sexual encounters, fleeting rear nudity, some drug content and recurring rough and crude sexual language, as well as profanity. The USCCB classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

### 'TAKING LIVES'

Smart and stylish thriller about an FBI profiler (Angelina Jolie) called in by Canadian authorities to help solve a string of grisly unsolved murders and who becomes emotionally involved with a witness (Ethan Hawke). Recurring gory violence and associated autopsy images, a sexual encounter with partial nudity, frequent rough and crude language. The USCCB classification is L — limited adult audience, films whose problematic content many adults would find troubling. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.