

Absolution

(aka: "Murder by Confession")

UK : 1978[†] : dir. Anthony Page : Bulldog

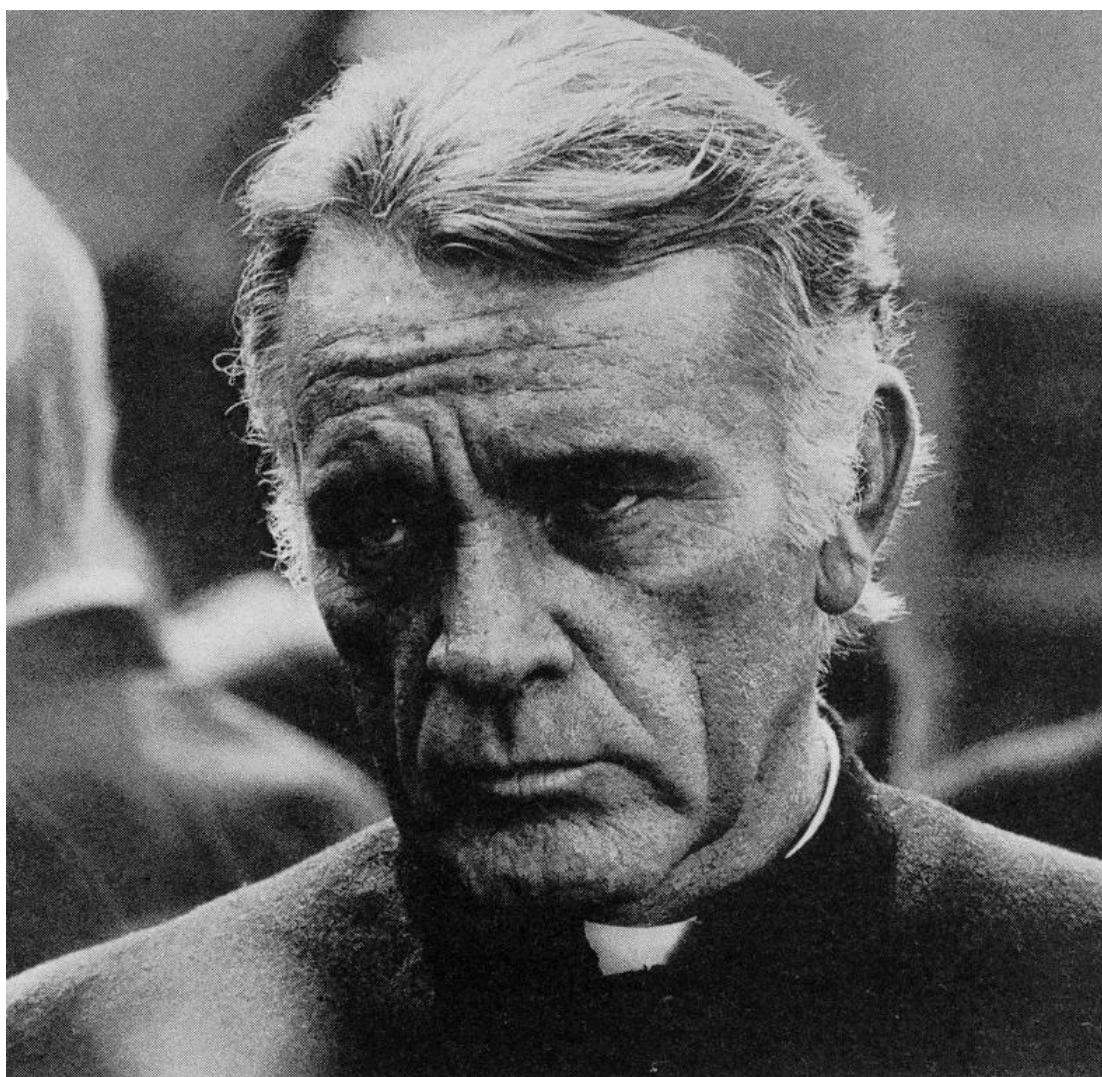
: 105 min

prod: Danny O'Donovan, Elliott Kastner : scr: Anthony Shaffer : dir.ph.: John Coquillion

[Dominic Guard](#); [Dai \(David\) Bradley](#).....

Richard Burton; Billy Connolly; Andrew Keir; Willoughby Gray

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	□	€	Z	ⓧ	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
2004a	8	9	10	3,565	-	-	-	-	-	No	Pre-1990



Not a face to trifle with – Richard Burton, one of the finest screen actors who nearly was, lends his presence to a thin tale of psych warfare at a Catholic boys' seminary.

All stills unless indicated – source: Cinema, winter 81

[†] but shelved until 1980



The three protagonists – Dominic Guard, Burton and Dai Bradley – size one another up

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

"Burton gives a commanding performance as a humourless, by-the-book priest who teaches at a boys' school, and falls victim to a snowballing practical joke played upon him by his pet student. Straightforward melodrama loses credibility toward the end. Written by Anthony Shaffer. Filmed in 1978, unreleased in the US until 1988, four years after Burton's death. **½"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"Tedious, wearisome story about strict-Catholic schoolmaster Burton in the power of pupils Guard and Bradley. One of Burton's turkeys from his later career. Filmed in 1979 and left on the shelf for obvious reasons. Nil"

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A schoolmaster priest at a Roman Catholic boarding school is taunted by a malicious pupil into committing murder. Interesting and suspenseful, though finally too complicated compromise between a thriller of the "SLEUTH" type and a downbeat character study. * "

"A dire slice of clever-clever narrative trickery"

- Paul Taylor, *MFB*

"You can't make real bricks from this kind of straw, since a potentially interesting study of character and environment is gradually

weakened by the constraints of a second-rate murder mystery" - *Guardian*

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"A film, based on Continental models, set in a Catholic boys' school where everyone has a crush on everyone else. The priest (Richard Burton) and the cripple (Dai Bradley) adore the boy (Dominic Guard) who prefers the hippie (Billy Connolly) in the woods, and though it is clear who will be the first to die, you will hardly care much about anything by the time Anthony Shaffer has finished his corkscrew plotting. Premiered two years after it was made. * "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"Burton put another dent in his reputation with this inert tale of a schoolmaster under the thumb of a student with a predilection for pranks that get out of hand. ½ "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"A hoary old Gothic thriller from the pen of Anthony Shaffer which should surprise nobody familiar with the plot twists wrought in "SLEUTH" and "DEATH TRAP". Burton as the humourless teacher-priest in a Catholic boarding school oozes fleshly torment as his prize pupil (Guard) develops a malicious rebellious streak, indulged in by a cunning manipulation of the inviolable privacy of the confessional. But, as always with Shaffer, things are not what they seem, and the last act of revelations about the mystery of the missing

pupil (Bradley as a grotesquely pimply cripple) tumble tediously out.”



The free spirit in the woods; the wonder boy with the itch for rebellion, and the gawky misfit whose function is to serve as the butt of general contempt. But no sadistic schoolmaster? Whatever are things coming to?

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“ **"ABSOLUTION"** is a dull, gloomy, nasty, contrived marketplace misfit, apparently designed to ride on Richard Burton's shirt-tails. Or in this case his cassock, since the actor portrays a stern, super-devout priest-teacher in a Catholic boarding school for boys. The gist of Anthony Shaffer's melodramatic plot has to do with a Catch-22 test of Burton's faith as two embittered students, taking advantage of the secrecy of the confessional box, conspire to drive him round the bend and to an unwitting killing. It's heavy, artless going, with an abrupt, embarrassing (for Burton) conclusion. Anthony Page's direction is routine, perhaps unavoidably.”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“Slow-moving but interesting tale of a priest's emotional and physical battle with one of his students at an English school for boys. As the priest, Richard Burton gives his usual



compelling performance. Nice plot twist at the

end. Not rated, but contains violence. **½”



Father Goddard investigates the murder he has just been informed of under the seal of the confessional.

Interview with director Shaffer from **Cinema** – Winter 81 – by Alan Jones and Mike C.Rossi:

“ **"ABSOLUTION"** is a brilliant horror tease centred around a Catholic boys' school where religious beliefs, tradition and loyalty are tested to their limits with horrific consequences. The film's central character is Father Goddard, excellently played by Richard Burton, ably supported by a cast including Dominic Guard and Dai Bradley as college pupils and Billy Connolly, well cast against type, as the intruding influence that triggers the terrifying chain of events.

"ABSOLUTION", directed by Anthony Page and written by award-winning Anthony Shaffer, is now on a well-deserved release, thanks to the suitably named Enterprise Pictures, after sitting for two years on producer Elliot Kastner's shelf. Anthony Shaffer spoke to us candidly, and at length, about **"ABSOLUTION"** just after the film had won prizes at both the Miami and Oxford Film Festivals. Shaffer's writing career began in 1968 when he wrote his first play, *"The Savage Parade"*. His next play was *"Sleuth"* which became one of the greatest theatrical hits of all time both here and in New York and went on to become an equally successful film starring Laurence Olivier and Michael Caine.

He wrote the screenplay for **"MR FORBUSH AND THE PENGUINS"** which starred John Hurt and Hayley Mills and followed it with **"FRENZY"** for Alfred Hitchcock. Then came **"THE WICKER MAN"** which was so badly

distributed it became a cause-celebre and went on to garner accolades like "the **CITIZEN KANE** of horror films".

More recently the West End has seen the opening of two more quirky thrillers, *"Murderer"* (optioned by United Artists), and *"The Case of the Oily Levantine"* (soon to open on Broadway as *"Whodunnit?"*) He also wrote the screen version of Agatha Christie's **"DEATH ON THE NILE"**, and next year will see the release of another Christie adaptation, **"EVIL UNDER THE SUN"**, which Shaffer says is one of the few of her stories that could feasibly be carried out with some success. He has written two, as yet unfilmed screenplays called *"Black Comedy"* and *"The Goshawk Squadron"*; he wrote uncredited scenes for the Burt Reynolds film **"ROUGH CUT"**, and there are now hopes to bring his new play, *"Widow's Weeds"*, premiered by the Queensland Theatre Company in Australia, to the West End soon.

Cinema: Why do you think it has taken **"ABSOLUTION"** so long to get a release?

Anthony Shaffer: The British Film Industry, as I know you are well aware, is devoted entirely to the second rate, or more precisely, a resistance to an idea that hasn't been tried before in one form or another. I think the problem is largely due to an elderly sales force, with a lifetime of selling **CARRY ON**'s that has trained them to be deeply suspicious of movies out of their line of experience. The cavalry doesn't come at the end of **"THE WICKER MAN"** and in **"ABSOLUTION"**

the priest is thrown into hell in a very real way. When you think that the average age of a movie audience is quite young – it's ridiculous! There's an awful sameness – even in America where they do sequels to big successes, but when we talk about the Film Industry, we talk about just that – an industry. It isn't an art form, any artistic content is peripheral.

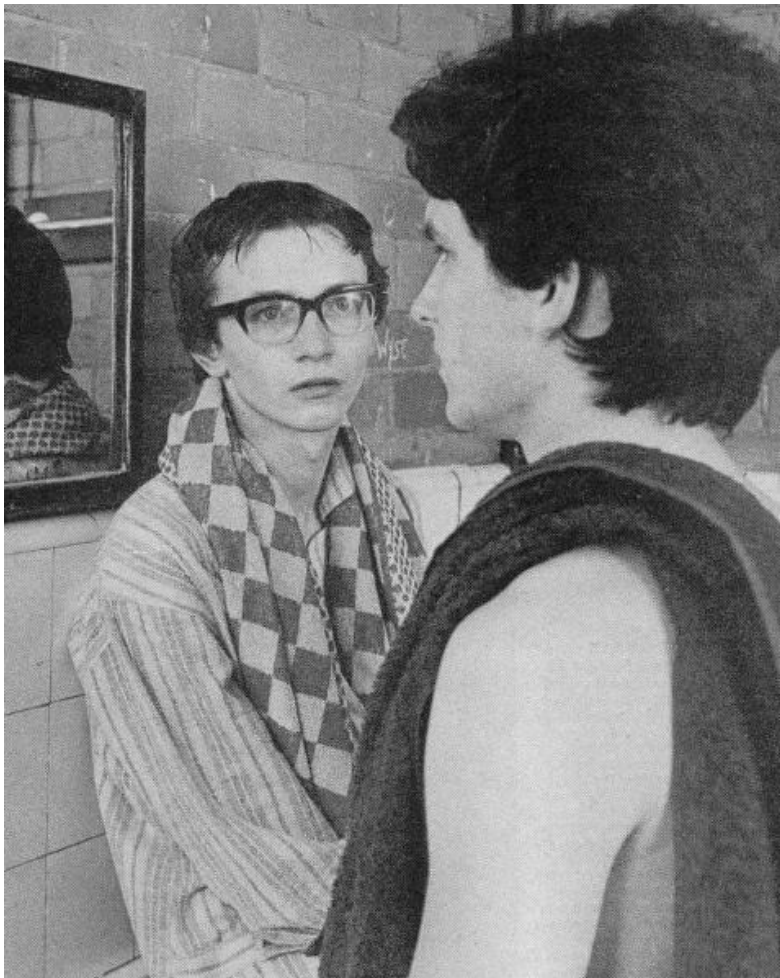
"**ABSOLUTION**" did very well at the festivals it has been to but there's an awful danger in that as well, of course. It becomes one of those movies. Film buff material only. Alarm bells do ring about "**ABSOLUTION**". It's a very different kind of movie in terms of what its very real proposition is – which is a form of spiritual judo. This fear of the intellectual that damns prize-winners almost equals the reluctance we originally encountered in making the film in the first place.

Cinema: Why did Elliot Kastner decide to produce the film?

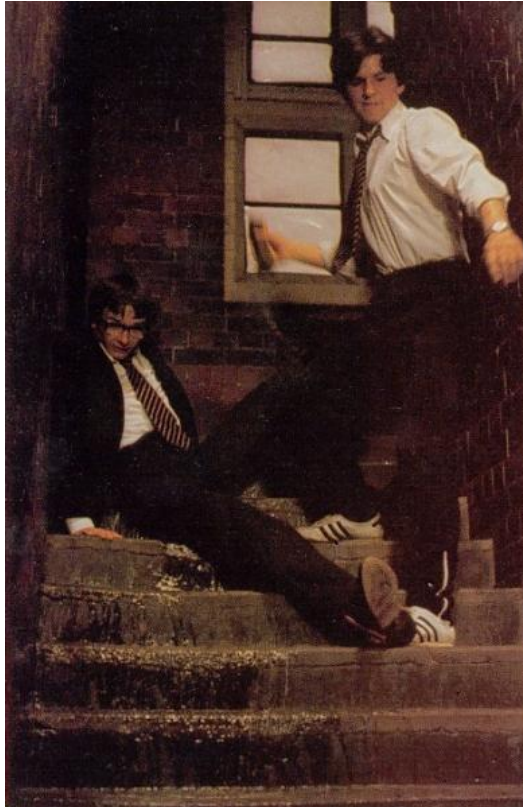
Anthony Shaffer: Elliot Kastner is a deal maker. He loves it. I sometimes think he's more interested in making deals than making pictures! He is constantly in the air flying from here to Los Angeles and one day he said to me, "I read the script of yours in New York called '**ABSOLUTION**'. I'll make it because I thought it was great." It was that simple. The script had been written in 1970 and it waited eight years for a decision like that.

Cinema: Why was Anthony Page chosen as director?

Anthony Shaffer: Well originally Douglas Hickox was going to direct it. (Hickox directed "**ENTERTAINING MR SLOANE**", "**SITTING TARGET**" and "**THEATRE OF BLOOD**"). "**ZULU DAWN**" came along and he suggested we use Anthony Page who had only done "**I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN**". I thought he was a taut director – too taut, in fact. If anything the film is a very bare account of the matter. It could have had a bit more flesh and bone but it is a strong movie and it moves along like a steam train.



*The look of love?
Lame Arthur (Dai Bradley)
reverses the perfect physical
specimen of Benjy (Dominic
Guard)... or does he?
OR DOES HE?*



Arthur is the habitual butt of Benjy's scorn and malicious practical jokes...

Cinema: Richard Burton gives one of his best performances in years in the role of Father Goddard. Were there any other contenders for the role?

Anthony Shaffer: Christopher Lee at one stage wanted to play the part but when he first read the screenplay, he was in "DRACULA" period which, I felt, would have shifted the emphasis of the piece entirely. Technically he could have played it, I'm sure, now he isn't even in that type of film anymore, but it certainly wasn't written with him in mind. The film was actually shot very quickly but we were casting for weeks.

Cinema: Without giving too much away, can you tell us why you wanted to write "ABSOLUTION" and where you got the idea from?

Anthony Shaffer: I started this script originally, not to tell this story at all, but to examine privilege. In a sense we all have various taboos which we imagine are privileged situations. When you go to school you are told not to sneak. When you go to the doctor you assume he can't talk about your problems to the next patient. We assume that our lawyers can't talk about our case to anyone. If we are Catholic and we confess to our priest, we assume that he will not repeat

what is spoken in the confidence of the confession. I thought it would be interesting to devise a schematic piece built around those kind of taboos where X number of people, using different kinds of imagined privilege, confront each other, in terms of a plot where the lives or interests of each of them hung on the other actually revealing what they know and what they cannot bring themselves to reveal.

In point of fact none of this is true. The only privilege recognised in England in law is that between a solicitor and his client. As none of the others exist, I abandoned this idea of a sort of "LA RONDE" of privilege as it seemed so schematic as to be stillborn. It really boiled down to a case of which one of them would be worth exploring and I thought of the Confessional. It took me a long time to think of the central device for "ABSOLUTION" and it came one day when I heard my children enter the house. My wife said, "is that you Claudia?" who was whispering at the time and I said it wasn't and went to find that in fact it was my other daughter. A mother can always recognise their child's voice but not when they are whispering. I thought about this for a long time and it gave me the clue to the story. Where does one man not see another and is not encouraged to look? The answer was the Confessional.

The key to the other parts of the story is in the phrase, "Oh go to hell!" It is usually used in a lighthearted manner but if you take it very seriously it translates thus: "I'm going to put you in hell -how can I do that?" I really couldn't do it if you don't believe in hell but if you do and you believe all the vows that Catholic priests take, then I can by careful manipulation manoeuvre you into a situation by inviting you to believe certain facts that aren't true. As a result you put yourself in a position where you have to kill and as a result of doing that you can no longer be a schoolmaster. But you can't tell anyone why as you are bound by the rule of confession. You can confess but you can't say why you did it otherwise you would be put in an asylum. One way or another it's a checkmate situation and as far as I can see, a very convincing account of hell on earth.

Cinema: Do you think that non-Catholics who will see the film will understand fully the implications of the confessional vow?

Anthony Shaffer: I think we go to some pains in the film, almost laboriously, to establish that fact. There is that long lecture Father Goddard

gives to the class so that the audience can grasp the immutability of the vow. Once they've got that it's full steam ahead. The confession was really the first kind of psychiatry. When I was researching the picture I spoke to lots of priests in various orders, Benedictine, Franciscan and Dominican. They all said that of course the confession was open to abuse, everything is, but the skilled priest is a man who over the years has learnt enough not to be fooled, he can figure out what is being held back by interpreting the excuses given and is taught to search it out via his questions. So the Goddard character in the film, in addition to everything else that is said to him at the climax, is a bad priest. He should have known the truth when he looks into Benji's eyes (Dominic Guard). Goddard is very much the author of his own destruction. Most often a form master will not confess his own form for a very good reason – he must not put himself in the position of being manipulated by his own class. I know the film mentions that but the point is that Goddard has got a sort of love affair with Benji. By that I don't necessarily mean a homosexual one – it is more a relationship of encouragement.

Again I asked priests about homosexuality and celibacy and it was explained to me quite simply that abstinence, like everything else, is something you get used to. We all have chemical favourites in life. Goddard's compassion is with Benji, not Arthur (Dai Bradley) who is a cripple and deserves it. What Goddard does is unprofessional – he is a bad priest – he puts himself in the way of harm – he invites it. He is abusive to the wrong people and insensitive to the weak. There are some very cruel scenes in the film concerning Arthur, none more so than when his aftershave is taken away from him. All Arthur is trying to do is compensate for his deficiencies. Goddard really does create his own destruction – he is bound to a hideous secret told to him by a boy he shouldn't have confessed, and then he can't wait to hear the next terrible installment.

Cinema: When you saw the finished print for the first time, were there things you then wished you could add or take away?

Anthony Shaffer: One thing I did think of when I saw it was, do we need a flashback? I hate them and you shouldn't need them if you've told the story correctly but some people aren't as bright as you would hope and my fear was confusing them. You actually can't blame people getting confused as the film does shift on its axis after 45 minutes. We could have

constructed, out of what had already been shot, an insert to go into the denouement scene in the church. However this would have broken the flow of the scene and really hurt Burton's astonishing performance so we decided not to do it. I still can't help feeling that to show visually the trick device would have helped what even I have to admit to being a trick of the most monstrous proportions.

There is another facet here as well. Do we get full value out of the story this way? For a long time now I've been playing with a theory. It is about the destructive elements in modern forms of detective fiction of which I am obviously fond. It occurred to me that in fact, the whodunnit is a very new idea. It was unknown until the mid-19th century. It is a recent addition to an author's armour and one that has proved immensely popular. Had it been known to Shakespeare, "Othello" could have been done as a whodunnit. For example instead of Iago coming out at the very beginning and saying I did it, meaning that the audience is privy to the fact, we saw it from the Moor's point of view, as a mystery. Would the strength of the piece be the same? I think the



Hoist on his own petard – the imperious Benji is involved in one final practixal joke – someone else's.

effect would have been to half or even quarter "Othello"'s power if it had been told as a whodunnit. Why I am saying all this is, just before we started "**ABSOLUTION**" I talked to Anthony Page about what I call the lagoon syndrome. Suppose we did clue the audience in from the start, the nightmare terror of all the tricks would arguably be a far more fascinating account of the matter. Page objected though as we were literally days away from starting the film. It is an interesting thought though, maybe we have got too close to the trick for the trick's sake and are losing quite a lot of the emotional side of it as the story unfolds." "

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

None of these films which aim to encapsulate the particular tensions and conflicts of a Catholic boys' internate have been entirely satisfactory. "**THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND**" (Australia 76) was probably the fairest effort to date, but there has also been "**LES AMITIÉS PARTICULIÈRES**" (France 64), "**ANTHRACITE**" (France 80) and "**CATHOLIC BOYS**" (US 85), to name but three. "**AU REVOIR LES ENFANTS**" was set in a similar institution, but focused on different stresses and discoveries altogether. And although Schaffer raises the question of homosexuality (meaning pederasty) in his interview, there is not a whiff of it in his film. The ménage-a-trois is psychological, not erotic.

"**ABSOLUTION**" is in any case closer in spirit to "**CHILD'S PLAY**" (72) or "**UNMAN, WITTERING AND ZIGO**" (71), both disappointing British films set in non-Catholic boarding schools, but in which an unpopular master is made the target of escalating psych war by his pupils (or by extension, it's a male equivalent of "**THESE THREE**", in which a girl pupil maliciously accuses two teachers of being lesbians).

Burton seems ill at ease in his role, relying on mere force of presence to overwhelm an essentially implausible plot. It was certainly more Christopher Lee's metier. Billy Connolly puts in a surprise early performance as a drifter who camps in the woods adjacent the school, befriending Guard, but he is in the film only briefly. David Bradley ("**KES**") and Dominic Guard ("**THE GO BETWEEN**") are pitted together as classmates, which itself strains the credulity to begin with, and their characters are shallowly drawn. Just as in "**SLEUTH**" and "**DEATH TRAP**" from the same author, the antagonists are simple cyphers in a conundrum. I shan't spoil the ending for those who haven't seen it, but the conundrum would have had more bite if the psychological relationships between the three had been properly fleshed out.

What's more, since "**KES**" was made in '69, and "**THE GO BETWEEN**" in '70, Bradley (aged 25) and Guard (aged 22) are absurdly long in the tooth to find themselves still in secondary school uniforms. Men in their early twenties simply **do not** pass as schoolboys, but directors continue to make the gaffe of populating such films with actors old enough to have children of their own. Like the stories of Agatha Christie he so admires, Schaffer's pieces are mind games for those with a taste for whodunnit-and-how, but lacking any interest in the personality element of the equation which, as Shakespeare knew, is where the meat is.

See subject index under **BOARDING SCHOOL / PUBLIC SCHOOL, BULLYING, THE CHILD AS EVIL IN OUR MIDST, DEATH / DYING CHILDREN** and **RELIGION**.