

Burnt Offerings

US : 1976 : dir. Dan Curtis : United Artists / P.E.A. : 115 min
 prod: Dan Curtis : scr: William F Nolan & Dan Curtis : dir.ph.: Jacques Marquette
[Lee Harcourt Montgomery](#)
 Karen Black; Oliver Reed; Burgess Meredith; Bette Davis; Eileen Heckart; Dub Taylor;
 Anthony James; Orin Cannon; James T Myers; Todd Turquand

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

"Ordinary couple, with young son and aunt in tow, rent an old mansion as their summer home, unaware that it's haunted. Strange occurrences lead to a totally predictable "surprise" ending. A big buildup to nothing. From Robert Marasco's novel. ** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwel's Film Guide review:

"An evil house restores itself by feeding on its tenants. An agreeably macabre idea for a five-page story is dragged out to interminable length, and seizes the attention only by a few shock moments. The title is mysteriously irrelevant. Scr: William F Nolan & Dan Curtis, from the novel by Dan Marasco."

"Before the ludicrous dénouement, the movie merely piles on one special effect after another

– none of them too special – and stalls for time.” – Janet Maslin, **Newsweek**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“Karen Black, Oliver Reed and child move into a house where strange things happen: it isn’t haunted – it’s the structure itself which is evil. Bette Davis, as an aunt, occasionally enlivens this slow-paced horror film.”

Movies of the Seventies general note:

“For the variety of themes it tackles and the directorial talent it has attracted, the horror film is certainly one of the more interesting areas of Seventies cinema. As the critic Robin Wood has pointed out:

"It is a commonplace that the (ostensibly) celebratory family film disappeared from the American cinema in the Fifties. What happened was that its implicit content became displaced into the horror film. What is enacted symbolically in "MEET ME IN ST LOUIS" (1944) is "realised" in "NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD" (1968)."

In Vincente Minnelli’s 1944 film, the child Tootie symbolically destroys her family through attacking a group of snowmen; in George Romero’s later film, a daughter kills and then tries to eat her mother. One more late-Sixties film to suggest that the horror derives from within the family was Roman Polanski’s **"ROSEMARY’S BABY"** (1968), in which Rosemary (Mia Farrow) actually gives birth to the Antichrist.

With this trend proceeding into the Seventies, there developed some deeply disturbing visions of values in transition, of growing doubts about the sanctity of the nuclear family and its role in society. Children themselves, traditionally symbols of innocence, and young people are seen as monstrous progeny in **"DEAD OF NIGHT"** (1972), **"THE EXORCIST"** (1973) and **"EXORCIST II: THE HERETIC"** (1977), **"IT’S ALIVE"** (1974) and **"IT LIVES AGAIN"** (1978), **"THE OMEN"** (1976) and **"DAMIEN – OMEN II"** (1978), **"CARRIE"** (1976), **"MARTIN"** (1977), **"THE FURY"** (1978) and **"THE BROOD"** (1979).

The family itself is the collective monster in such films as **"FRIGHTMARE"** (1974) and **"THE HILLS HAVE EYES"** (1977); and the

home becomes the deadliest of traps in **"BURNT OFFERINGS"** (1976) and **"FULL CIRCLE"** (1977). The overwhelming impression given by the best of these films is of a dark fantasy on the theme of Ken Loach’s hard-hitting social drama **"FAMILY LIFE"** (1971), in which her family and collusive authorities pressurise an independent-minded young woman into a mental home.”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

“Horrendous! When Miss Black and hubby Reed rent a summer house, they’re faced with a number of surprises, none of which seems credible. * ”

Radio Times Guide to Films review:

“In this **"AMITYVILLE HORROR"** style chiller, Karen Black, Oliver Reed and family take a house for the summer. The fact that the house is owned by that old fruitcake Burgess Meredith should have told them at the start that things will soon get very bumpy in the night. Dan Curtis’s film is much too long and not at all scary by today’s standards. It’s also laughable in places, with Bette Davis as a dotty old biddy and especially in the scenes where Reed gets the heebie-jeebies. * ”

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

“Skilful direction from Dan Curtis produces a lot of chills and tension in this thriller about a family who rents a creepy old mansion for the summer. There are solid performances, too, from Black, Reed, Lee Montgomery, and Bette Davis. Clichés are sprinkled throughout the plot, and the ending is predictable. But the eerie goings-on at that rambling, murderous house and the mystery behind the locked door on the top floor will keep moviegoers on the edge of their seats.¹ Also with Burgess Meredith and Eileen Heckart. *** ”

The Time Out Film Guide review:

“The current minor boom in American horror films has two notable features: the single-minded concentration on the nuclear family as a point of attack, and the consistent rejection

¹ If anyone is kept on the edge of their seat during this film they will simply be in a hurry to leave.

of happy endings. This tale of a family taking a spooky old mansion for the summer would be strictly formula stuff were it not for these elements, but veteran Eugène Lourie's art direction helps."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"A predecessor of **"THE AMITYVILLE HORROR"** about a house (and a ghost upstairs?) which takes possession of its inhabitants. Director Dan Curtis' skilful direction helps disguise the basic silliness of the affair, and adds effectiveness to some of the shock set-pieces, notably a sequence in a swimming pool. Karen Black is quite good as the possessed wife, especially when she becomes involved in the inevitable **"PSYCHO"**-style twist at the end, but the rest of the players – Oliver Reed, Bette Davis and Burgess Meredith in particular – have far too high a time for the film's own good.² ** "

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Good acting cannot save this predictable horror film concerning a haunted house. More of a made-for-television type of film than a true motion picture. Rated **"PG"** ** "

The United Artists Story review:

"Leftovers" might have been a more suitable title for **"BURNT OFFERINGS"**, a predictable tale of the supernatural in which an eerie, isolated country house stood in once again for the villain. Oliver Reed and his family, wife Karen Black, son Lee Montgomery and aunt, a wasted Bette Davis – should have known better than to rent the house from eccentric siblings Burgess Meredith and Eileen Heckart, especially as they are asked to take responsibility for the owners' (unseen) old mother confined to her top-floor rooms. Producer/director Dan Curtis resorted to Gothic clichés when the characters start to act strangely, doors and windows open and shut mysteriously, and an obligatory storm rages. The film, scripted by Curtis and William F Nolan (from a novel by Robert Marasco), failed to work up much of a storm at the box office. Dub Taylor, Anthony James, Orin Cannon, James T Myers and Todd Turquand had other roles."

² As so often, the boy is singled out as the only one of the leads not to rate a mention in the review

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Lee Harcourt Montgomery:

"Elliot and Olivia, the Irish-Canadian parents of Lee Harcourt Montgomery, were both actors and their pudgy little lad made a predictably early start in show business, aged about four. The family moved to California in 1969, and two years later Lee was working for Walt Disney and co-starring with a golden-egg-laying duck. In **"BEN"** (sequel to **"WILLARD"**) he co-starred with a rat, and in **"BURNT OFFERINGS"** with Oliver Reed.

Lee, a pleasant, kid-next-door type, was good at conveying mounting panic, and was often required to. He had particular trouble with screen fathers, at least two of whom (in **"CRY IN THE WILDERNESS"** and **"BURNT OFFERINGS"**) tried to kill him.

His later films included **"TRUE GRIT, A FURTHER ADVENTURE"** (78), **"SPLIT IMAGE"** (82), **"MUTANT"** (83), **"STAYING TOGETHER"** (84, a lead), **"NIGHT SHADOWS"** (84) and **"GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN"** (85)."

Cast:

Marian	Karen Black
Ben	Oliver Reed
David	Lee Harcourt Montgomery
Aunt Elizabeth	Bette Davis
Brother	Burgess Meredith
Roz	Eileen Rickart
Walker	Dub Taylor

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "Variety Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]



*In one of the film's **TERROR SET-PIECES**, dad Ben (the rat's name from Montgomery's earlier film, get it?) flings son David around in the backyard pool and half-drowns the boy. But it's all in the name of good healthy family fun, right?
Source: indeterminate website*

Casting directors give little thought to plausibility when constructing these nuclear families for bombardment by the forces of chaos. Would you believe Karen Black and Oliver Reed?? And son Lee Montgomery bears not the slightest resemblance to either. This is an entirely formulaic haunted house film (in that sense very much like **"THE AMITYVILLE HORROR"**, which was scary only in its popularity three years later), nothing remotely approaching the chilling atmosphere of **"THE HAUNTING"** (63), or even of **"THE CHANGELING"** (79), with its disastrously botched climax. **"POLTERGEIST"** and **"THE SHINING"** have come and gone meanwhile, and today **"BURNT OFFERINGS"** will look merely like a TV movie with a cast line-up it neither warrants nor uses to great effect.

Wife Black becomes steadily more estranged from her family as she attends the unseen bedridden woman upstairs, leaving Ollie to lurch about the swimming pool attempting to drown their son. The presence of Bette Davis in the film contributes little, beyond raising audience expectations needlessly, and the grand finale, as the house sheds its shingles like a snake shedding its skin, is as unexciting as it is long-expected. At the renowned "Sitges Festival of Fantasy and Terror Films" 1977, **"BURNT OFFERINGS"** won the International Jury Gold Medal for Best Film, while Burgess Meredith and Karen Black won awards for Best Actor and Best Actress. **"CITIZEN KANE"** eat your heart out, eh?

Lee Harcourt Montgomery was born in Winnipeg, Canada in 1961, which would make him 14. He has precious little to do, beyond serving as "accident" victim in waiting, and his parents' last tenuous link with their blissful domestic life beyond the domain of their summer home. Lee did not secure a role of any substance until the TV movie **"STAYING TOGETHER"** (84), as head of a sibling household, by which time he had graduated to the status of teen hunk (American boys are not permitted to be attractive until safely well past puberty, I believe it's in the constitution somewhere). His other films included **"THE HARNESS"** (71), **"BOBBY"** (72), **"RUNAWAY!"** (73) and **"THE SAVAGE IS LOOSE"** (74), all eminently forgettable no doubt.

See subject index under [GHOSTS & HAUNTINGS](#) and **SWIMMING**.