

Leon

France / US : 1995 : dir. Luc Besson : Columbia : c106 min
 prod: : scr: Luc Besson : dir.ph.:
[Natalie Portman](#)
 Jean Reno; Gary Oldman; Danny Aiello

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 € M ♂	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Small hot pants meet large handguns – this subtext was not lost on some audiences, who howled in protest at such a warm, sympathetic portrayal of a man/girl love affair, albeit an unconsummated one. But it is precisely that unexpected strand to the Charles Bronsonesque storyline which makes "LEON" so fresh and rewarding.

Source: Metro

Empire pre-release note:

"Ice-man assassin Léon (Reno) finds himself playing pappa to orphaned youngster Matilda (Portman) whose parents were annihilated by Oldman's murderous bastard. French director Besson ("NIKITA", "THE BIG BLUE") presents a fresh view of New York with requisite designer violence. The prospects: Besson has style by the truckload but mixing violence with kids will upset the tabloids..."

Film Review – January 1995 – note:

"Comedy in which a professional hitman teaches his trade to a vengeful young girl."

The Guardian note:

"Well-orchestrated thriller about an expert hitman and his 12-year old pupil. Behind the studied glitz of the film-making, however, lurks a very un-Hollywood romanticism."

Metro review:

"Hit man Léon (Jean Reno) ekes out a lonely existence in a New York apartment block. But when the neighbours are massacred by corrupt narcotics detective Norman Stansfield (Gary Oldman) and his henchmen, he becomes the unlikely protector of newly-orphaned Mathilda (Natalie Portman) who narrowly escaped execution. After witnessing the murder of her

family¹, she asks Léon to help her exact revenge. Initial wariness between the two grows into a mutually affectionate and sentimental relationship. Director Luc Besson adds continental flair and charm to what could easily have been a derivative action film.”

– Jayne Atherton

“When 12-year old Mathilda (Natalie Portman) sees her family wiped out by corrupt FBI agents, she seeks refuge with reclusive neighbour Léon (Jean Reno) – a professional hit man for the Mob. Soon, she asks his help to revenge the deaths of her loved ones².”

Blockbusters video rental promotional flier note:

“Gary Oldman plays a seedy police official whose addiction to corruption is only surpassed by his addiction to drugs. Natalie Portman plays a 12-year old orphan who cannot forget or forgive the man who killed her brother. Jean Reno plays a lone hitman named **“LEON”** who has a spectacularly high rate of success in his chosen profession. They come together in a fast-moving plot, with a violent and gripping storyline, that makes **“LEON”** one of the most talked-about rental releases of 1995. **“LEON”** was directed by Luc Besson. He also directed the acclaimed **“NIKITA”**, which was remade as **“THE ASSASSIN”**, starring Bridget Fonda.”

Radio Times notes:

“Thriller starring Jean Reno and Gary Oldman. A hitman meets a young girl following the murder of her family by drug dealers. Reluctantly becoming her mentor, he trains her so that she can take revenge. **** ”

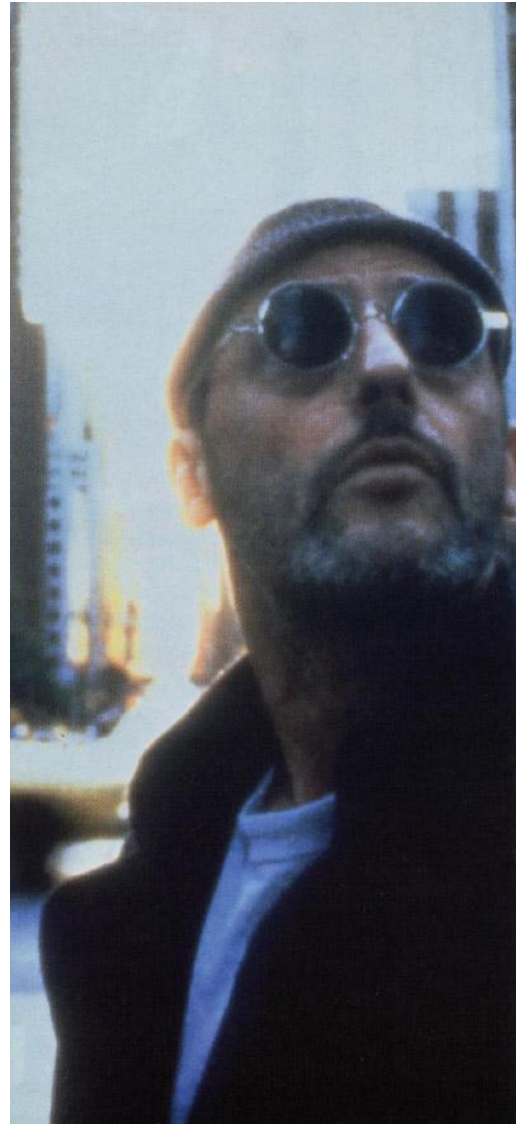
“Thriller about a hitman and an orphan. ****”

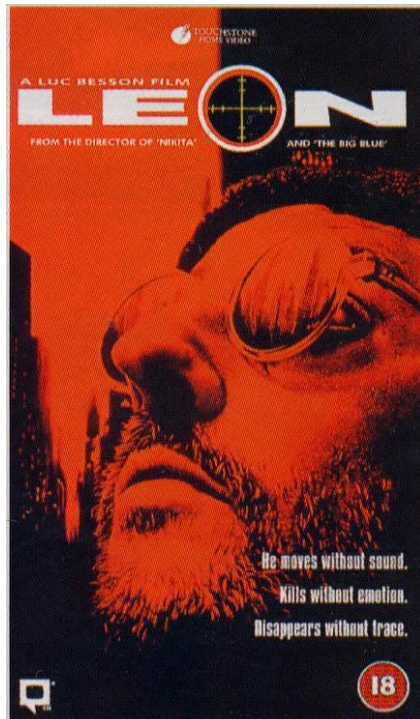
“Not a lot of people know that... during the filming of a scene for crime drama **“LEON”**, a real-life robbery was taking place close by. As the thief was making his getaway, he mistakenly ran on to the set, where he gave himself up to a group of actors dressed as policemen.”

¹ *She doesn't witness it*

² *Oldman is not FBI, Portman does not see her family killed, and she detests them all, apart from her younger brother. These reviewers really do their homework, don't they!*

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001" or "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995"]





Above right: The most implausible element in the plot – where the veteran killing machine consents to take on the small girl as his apprentice – is deftly shooed past us in a few lines of dialogue, and Leon then sets about instructing her on the code of his trade (“No women, no kids”) and the tools of the job. Nathalie soaks it all in with a steely resolve worthy of any Lady Macbeth.

Source: Metro



Source: Blockbusters video promotional flier



You wouldn't want to be caught messing with his houseplant. Leon is a "button man" – sorry, a "mechanic" – sorry, a "cleaner", it's hard to keep pace with all these underworld euphemisms for hired murderers.

Source: indeterminate

**"He moves without sound
Kills without emotion,
Disappears without trace."**

Hit men movies are ten a penny. Films in which young kids – especially orphans – teach an embittered recluse or loner to enjoy life and companionship again are too numerous to mention. "**LEON**" is both, and yet something quite unique. It's a tender love affair between a 12-year old fugitive and an illiterate "cleaner" for one of Little Italy's small-time godfathers – and it works!

"**LEON**" plays in one respect like a clever inversion of "**TAXI DRIVER**". Here it is the jaded, streetwise Jodie Foster (Portman) who becomes fascinated with taciturn loner De Niro (Reno), and uses him to fulfil her own hunger for retribution against the squalid city life around her. At the age of 12 Foster would have leapt at a role like this, because Mathilda is a far stronger, better defined character than Foster's roles in either "**TAXI DRIVER**" or "**THE LITTLE GIRL WHO LIVES DOWN THE LANE**". Mathilda is a shrewd, tough cookie with very few illusions, for all that she flounces through the film in *Über-jailbait* outfits, and Portman is simply terrific.

The film was apparently written by Besson expressly for Jean Reno, which is strange, because he's so self-evidently Gallic that he seems vaguely out of place as the dull-witted protégé of Tony (Danny Aiello), snapped up straight off the boat from Italy and trained as a lone assassin. Leon's life is edgy and sparse. We watch him lovingly tending his houseplant, ironing his own laundry with the intense concentration of a four-year old, practically clapping his hands for joy in the front row of an old Gene Kelly musical. But Leon is a formidable killing machine, effortlessly cleaving his way through the hired goons of an out-of-town drug-dealer to corner the man himself, then spiriting away like a Batman or Spiderman. He's a fascinating character from the outset.

Nathalie (Portman) seems at first a more routine creation, a sassy foul-mouthed 12-year old, knocked about by her free-range sewage father, and spitting with her sluttish older sister.

Her youth and mousey frame belie the age of the personality – she's 12 going on 35. But as the film proceeds, and her relationship with Leon stutters into gear, so Portman imprints her own feisty, self-willed personality onto the cliché. Nathalie is not "vulnerable" at all, she is weak and desperate, but with a sense of purpose that threatens to over-reach itself, both in her courtship of Leon, and her quest for revenge against the killers of her infant brother.

There is more of "Lolita" in "**LEON**" than there was in Adrian Lyne's much-vaunted 1997 remake of the Nabokov story. The relationship between Nathalie and the gunman does not, in fact, become sexual, but it's manifestly a tale of seduction – the girl of the man – which greatly insensed the pundits of the sex abuse industry. Some twenty minutes were cut from the original print for the film's US/UK release. Yet the film's best moments are not the climactic shoot-out with the SWAT team, or Leon's earlier demonstration of his killing prowess, but the awkward smoothing of the path between these two prickly loners, culminating in a mime game where Portman does Monroe and Chaplin, and Leon shyly essays a John Wayne impression. Despite the way he earns a living, Leon's private morality is reassuringly orthodox and old-fashioned. He tries to stop the girl smoking, cursing, flirting with older youths on the street, and Nathalie for her part meekly submits to all his censures because she is charmed by his simple attempts to make "a good girl" of her.

The third magic ingredient of the film's success is Gary Oldman, playing a psychotic New York narc detective skimming off the drug traffic. Oldman was so taken with the suggested role he's said to have scribbled off a contract on the back of a restaurant napkin. He hogs the screen whenever he's on it but, even granted that his character is written as a grotesque, Oldman plays it *so* over the top that his hamming nearly ruins a good film. Any serious actor who becomes for a brief while the toast of the industry – Brando, De Niro, Hopkins – risks the onset of elephantitis of the ego, and Oldman displays worrying symptoms of it in some of his recent performances, here especially. His character is so transparently unstable and deranged that he scares the bejeebers out of his police colleagues as much as his prey, and one has to question why the department hasn't already had him carted off in a straitjacket. He carries a tin of looney pills in his pocket and always pops one before bursting into maniacal overdrive, yet he apparently carries sufficient departmental clout to call in every SWAT team from Manhattan to San Diego to catch a single cornered man and a 12-year old girl. The part is overwritten, as well as overplayed. A subtler, smoother menace would have suited the tone of the film better.

The always dependable Danny Aiello is more in tune as the cut-price Corleone, not delivering a bravura performance as he did in "**ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA**" as the corrupt police chief, but a more muted, nicely ambivalent character. The audience more than half suspects he's duping the slow-witted Leon, "looking after" all his money for him and discouraging any impulse to form outside attachments, and it's only at the end of the film that we realise he's as good as his word.

Nathalie's impatience, as I've said, is the spur which drives the plot along. When she and Leon are obliged to move to a new hotel as "father and daughter", it isn't long before she tires of that pretense and shocks the concierge by confiding that "he's my *lover*, actually", so that they're thrown out of the place immediately. Returning to her family's apartment, still roped off by police tape, she almost tumbles straight into the hands of Oldman again, and when Leon seems slow to execute a "contract" against the detective on her behalf, she makes a bee-line for police headquarters to do the job herself, obliging Leon to come to her rescue in a scene reminiscent of "**THE TERMINATOR**". She's still a child in that sense at least – impetuous, confusing wish-dreams and reality, careless of her own jeopardy (and Leon's), and even her adoption of him (rather than vice versa) is partly a game she's playing in her own mind, hardly understanding the full implications. These contradictions in her make the character one of the most interesting child-roles American cinema has produced in recent years, and elevates the film far above the routine of lone-avenger action tales. **Recommended.**

There's a fad now for releasing "director's cut" versions on video and DVD of films we're already familiar with, so we have to hope the original European cut of this film will be seen here in due course. The missing twenty minutes presumably flesh out Leon and Nathalie's relationship, rather than the volcanic ravings of Gary Oldman. Let's hope so anyway.

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