

Salem's Lot

(aka: "Salem's Lot: The Movie", "Bloodthirst")

US TV 3-part serial : 1979 : dir. Tobe Hooper : Warner

: 200 min

prod: Richard Kobritz : scr: Paul Monash : dir.ph.: Jules Brenner

[Lance Kerwin](#); [Brad Savage](#); [Ronnie Scribner](#)

David Soul; James Mason; Bonnie Bedelia; Lew Ayres; Geoffrey Lewis; Kenneth McMillan;

Reggie Nalder; Marie Windsor; Elisha Cook; George Dzundza; Ed Flanders; Clarissa Kaye;

Barbara Babcock; Bonnie Bartlett; Fred Willard; James Gallery

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	KBytes	Ω	□	≠	Z	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
2001 review:

"Well-made hair-raiser based on Stephen King's bestseller about vampires running rampant in small New England town. Mason is great as sinister antique dealer, and Nalder's vampire is terrifying, but Soul is only so-so as successful writer returning home to strange goings-on. Later cut to 150 minutes: the 112-minute version available on video and shown on cable TV as "SALEM'S LOT: THE MOVIE" and "BLOODTHIRST" is the overseas theatrical version and contains more explicit violence. Followed by "A RETURN TO SALEM'S LOT". *Above Average.*"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie approximation of the above:

"Vampires are abroad in modern-day New England. A well-made horror film in which the only curse is the length. Mason is great as the sinister antique dealer. Soul is average as the revered writer who returns home and experiences strange things. From Stephen King's bestseller. *Good*"

Halliwell's Film Guide review (of the pared-down theatrical version):

"A writer returns to his small hometown to discover that it is being taken over by vampires. Effective horror movie, cut from a 200-minute two-part TV mini-series. * "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

"Stephen King's novel about vampires is turned into a truly scary horror film about a novelist (Soul) returning to his hometown, which is enveloped in deadly terror involving a vampire and his ruthless consort (Mason). ***"

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"A surprisingly successful small-screen adaptation of Stephen King's vampire novel. In the Maine town of Jerusalem's Lot, it slowly dawns on writer Soul that antique-dealer Mason is a harbinger of blood-sucking evil. Edited down from the 190-minute, two-part TV movie, this cinema release version is slightly gorier and tighter than the original. Paring away the excessive plot exposition of Paul Monash's teleplay, it places the emphasis on Hooper's fluid camerawork, creepy atmospherics, and skilful handling of the gripping climax."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Tobe Hooper's scary version of the Stephen King bestseller retains its visceral power - and even has a few extra frames of added gore for good measure in the video version. David Soul is not ideally cast as a writer but James Mason displays creepy authority as a sinister antique dealer who is actually the ruthless watchdog for one of the most frightening vampires on film - Reggie Nalder's haunting appearance

terrifyingly recalls the original "NOSFERATU".
*** "

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"This story of vampires in modern-day New England is one of the better adaptations of Stephen King's novels on film. Some real chills go along with an intelligent script in what was originally a two-part TV movie. **** "

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Halliwell's Television Companion", "History of Television", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "Variety Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Although arguably a TV movie, I have listed this under the TV index since it was originally broadcast as a multi-part serial. Beware the video release version: shorn to nearly half its original length, many subplots and most of the atmosphere are lost.

In his anecdotal survey of the SF/horror genres in popular culture, "*Danse Macabre*", Stephen King, who lectures on the subject at American universities, reflected with a tinge of irony that this early adaptation from his writings was one of the few he was satisfied with, despite one or two gaffes in the teleplay. Since the publication of that book, dozens more of his works have been filmed, the general standard of which has deteriorated appallingly, so that "**SALEM'S LOT**" really does stand out now as a film which gives some inkling why the man's novels are consistently in the bestseller lists.

The *Time Out* critic felt that the original TV version was flabby and over-expository, but I would argue the contrary: the careful pacing of the script replicates very well King's trademark qualities. He is careful to construct an atmosphere of banal normality, and people it with credible personalities, before he allows the supernatural events to go into top gear. His later novel "**IT**" is a perfect example of that strategy, and the awful TV movie it spawned a perfect example of how to botch up the atmosphere he conjures so well in his writing.

What's more, there is the question of "suspension of disbelief". The longer an author can postpone committing himself to essentially implausible conclusions, the longer he can hold his audience in a state of nervous unease. The climax of "**SALEM'S LOT**", as with all vampire films, resorts to crucifixes and holy water and wooden stakes, by which time we relax into viewing it as just another piece of vampire nonsense – coffins and sunsets and evaporating corpses, the stuff we know is bunk. For a long time, however, the film tantalises us by threading the icons of vampire lore into prosaic small-town American life. The European theatrical release version jettisons most of this preamble in a hurry to reach the special effects sequences which, though certainly well done, throw the film into imbalance and lose that all-important suspension of disbelief.

One of the more interesting changes between the original book and the TV version was in the switching of the Straker/Barlow personalities. In the book, antique dealer Straker is the more terrifying ogre-like presence, while his partner Barlow (ie: the vampire) is a suave, urbane and seductive type. In Tobe Hooper's film, Barlow does not appear until near the end, and is a hideous blue-skinned ghoul, hissing and snarling like some half-man, half-serpent with immense physical strength. It is Straker (James Mason) who is the suave, imperious presence, quietly mocking the denizens of Salem's Lot's in-bred community, on whom he has descended to prey. And it is unquestionably Mason who makes the film, with a performance of deliciously subtle menace. "You'll enjoy Mr Barlow" he promises over-inquisitive writer Ben Mears (Soul), "And he'll enjoy you. Oh yes..." He is in effect an "Igor" type, the vampire's human watchdog by daylight hours, but no other vampire in the cinema had such a cunning or sophisticated chaperone as this. When asked what he has done with heroine Bonnie Bedelia, Straker replies with lip-smacking understatement "Ah.. I've taken her to where she wished to go. To meet the man she came here to meet." He has delivered her into the clutches of his master, and that's the last we see of her alive.

But why is the film relevant to this archive? I'm glad you asked me that.

The first person to feel the kiss of Mr Barlow, and join the realm of the undead, is not some nubile young virgin (or, well, in a sense) but young Ralphie Glick (Ronnie Scribner), on his way home with brother Danny (Brad Savage) from a visit to schoolfriend Mark Petrie (Lance Kerwin), a horror film nut. The following night, in one of the film's more sinister sequences, brother Danny awakes to see Ralphie floating outside his bedroom window with a ghastly grin, scratching to be let inside. Within 48 hours Danny is dead of "pernicious anaemia". Following Danny's funeral, the gravedigger feels strangely compelled to leap down into the yawning grave and open the coffin. The boy promptly sits up to meet him, and the gravedigger wakes the next morning not quite his full-blooded self.

I've already indicated that Stephen King is a lecturer in media studies, and certainly very well conversant with the deconstruction of horror stories to reveal the underlying societal fears and neuroses they manipulate. He discusses this theme at some length in "*Danse Macabre*". So he will be well aware of the heterosexual subtexts of the vampire genre, the explicit eroticism of "**DRACULA**" films old and new. It is intriguing then, and of course **all** the critics missed it, that vampirism in his story is spread from man to boy, boy to boy, boy to man, son to mother.. But is he seeking then to divorce the vampire kiss from its deep cultural associations with illicit nocturnal meetings? Or is he, more provocatively, splicing the vampire myth to another neurosis, which reached epidemic proportions in American culture by the early eighties? Is Barlow the first "child molester" vampire?

Once alerted to this reading, and listening to the film's dialogue more carefully, one will find other indicators – in the character of Mason's Straker, for example, to support the idea that King is consciously keying off the "stranger danger" paranoia, as rampant in modern culture as the fear of syphilis was when Bram Stoker first wrote "*Dracula*". Two men living together in an insular, narrow-minded American small town, and then a young boy goes missing... What's more, the house they occupy – the Marsten house – is already notorious in the area as a dwelling place of the wicked, associated, many years before, with the disappearances of several local boys. Indeed it is that very house which draws novelist Ben Mears back to his home town, to exorcise some boyhood terror by centring his latest book on it. He believes that the house itself is evil in the very fabric of its structure, and that an evil house attracts evil men. "But if an evil house attracts evil men..." someone points out to him, "Why did it attract me?" Ben cuts in, startled at the thought.

Lance Kerwin's role in the film is another point of reference for the viewer, for he is one of the few survivors from the township, and by the end of the film has become a sort of apprentice to vampire-hunter Mears. The film opens in Ximico, Guatemala, some years later, where man and boy, still on the run from the vengeance-seeking undead of Salem's Lot, discover that yet another one has tracked them down. In the best American tradition, King has given his Van Helsing a boy sidekick.