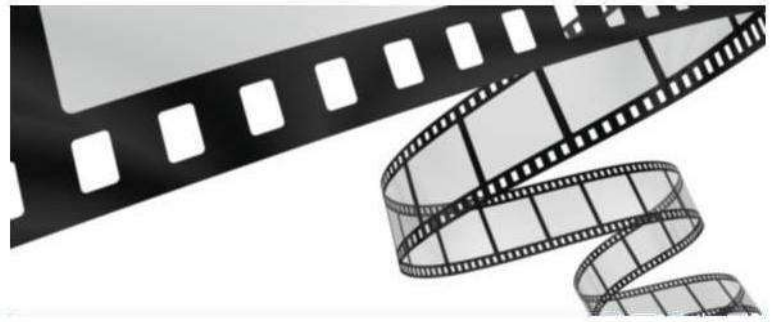


# CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

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## ***Blue Ruin***

**(USA/France 2013)**

**Running time: 90 minutes and 14 seconds**

**Written, directed and photographed by Jeremy Saulnier**

**Cast: Macon Blair (Dwight); Devin Ratray (Ben Gaffney); Amy Hargreaves (Sam); Kevin Kolack (Teddy Cleland); Eve Plumb (Kris Cleland); David W. Thompson (William); Brent Werzner (Carl Cleland); Stacy Rock (Hope Cleland); Sidné Anderson (Officer Eddy); Sandy Barnett (Wade Cleland Jr)**

A stripped-down tale of revenge with bloodied hands and a blackened heart, this viscerally intelligent thriller takes a new stab at an old genre with refreshingly distressing results.

The first movement of writer-director-cinematographer Jeremy Saulnier's low-budget gem is a masterclass in visual exposition, with economic action and precisely choreographed expression explaining a complex back-story more eloquently than dialogue ever could.

After a brilliant 20 minutes, *Blue Ruin* has not only covered but largely overturned the ground upon which most revenge thrillers would expend their entire running time. What follows is the fallout from those actions, with age-old eye-for-an-eye riffs suddenly made to seem fresh and new by a film-maker crucially more interested in exploring what happens *next* than simply rehashing what has gone before.

Director Saulnier made his feature debut in 2007 with *Murder Party*, a low-budget horror comedy described by its creator as "*The Breakfast Club* with chainsaws and hard drugs", which showed little evidence of the razor-sharp precision displayed here. Funded through a mixture of personal savings and Kickstarter campaigns, *Blue Ruin* was originally rejected by selectors at Sundance (further evidence that genre films can still baffle the arty indie crowd) before making waves at Cannes, where it drew inevitable comparisons with the early works of the Coen brothers. Certainly there's something of the Euro-inflected American gothic of *Blood Simple* (and, indeed, *Fargo*) in there, although the bleak Israeli anti-revenge satire *Big Bad Wolves* is perhaps closer in both tone and intent. An intelligently subversive film about the corrupting power of violence and the awful mechanics of killing, *Blue Ruin* both replicates and reinvents the narrative tropes of enduringly (un)satisfying cinematic clichés to impressively disorientating effect.

At the wounded heart of it all is Macon Blair, a lethal screen weapon employed to piercing effect by Saulnier. As Dwight, Blair offers a stark contrast to the expressionless avenging

angels who litter traditional exploitation cinema – a properly broken man, stumbling his way down a preordained path more in fear than in anger, each escalating act of vengeance/survival taking another chunk out of his fractured character. Early scenes depict Dwight as a frightened, feral creature, reacting to news of his nemesis's release with cowering horror. Later, following an encounter with a razor and a stolen wardrobe, he emerges as a fragile nebbish, an uncommunicative antihero alongside whom Dustin Hoffman's nerdy mathematician from *Straw Dogs* (to which this pays passing homage) seems like a man of muscular action from the outset.

When Dwight's sister, who has endeavoured to move on from family tragedy, calls her brother "weak", his response is more accepting than self-justifying. While most *Death Wish*-influenced narratives concede only emotional detachment or hollowness on the part of their damaged leads, *Blue Ruin* is happy to add terror and cowardice as defining traits, along with a palpable sense of alarm at the physical results of violence ("the rest of his head is... over there"), which dances around the edge of graveside humour without ever falling into the gaping chasm of careless, callous comedy.

The supporting performances are strong too, from the believable despair of Amy Hargreaves's Sam, who finds her life destroyed anew by her brother's fatally reduced worldview, to the troubled but unwavering support of Devin Ratray's gun-toting old school buddy, a character who could be played for grim laughs, but remains just on the right side of deadpan. And although the rest of the film has a hard time living up to the promise of that audacious opening act, it never descends into either affectless satire or unwarranted carnage, as victim turns to killer and family turns upon family with quasi-biblical results.

Underneath it all there's gnawing unease about a culture built upon the right to bear arms, and for once the ultimate rejection of firepower as a solution to *anything* seems honest rather than opportunistic. It all adds up to a gripping, gruelling, thought-provoking work; lean, mean and bad to the bone.

From Mark Kermode's review in *The Observer*, Sunday 4 May 2014

**Our next film: *Wadjda*, Thursday 11 December at 8pm. Don't forget our quiz night on Friday 28 November – see Karen in the foyer for tickets.**