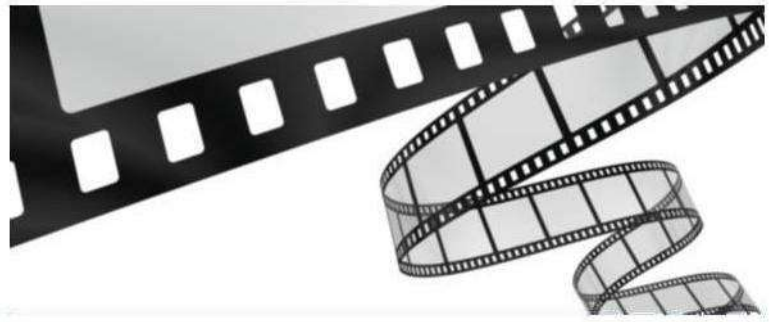


# CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

Visit our website at:  
[www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk](http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk)

Follow us on:  
[twitter.com/ChelmsfordFilmC](https://twitter.com/ChelmsfordFilmC)  
[www.facebook.com/ChelmsfordFilmC](https://www.facebook.com/ChelmsfordFilmC)



## The Night of the Hunter 1955

93 mins USA

**Director:** Charles Laughton  
**Screenplay:** James Agee  
**Cinematographer:** Stanley Cortez

**Cast:** Robert Mitchum - Harry Powell  
Shelley Winters - Willa Harper  
Lillian Gish - Rachel Cooper  
James Gleason - Birdie Steptoe  
Evelyn Varden - Icey Spoon  
Peter Graves - Ben Harper



**Spoiler Alert** – the following review contains plot details

“It’s really a nightmarish sort of Mother Goose tale we are telling,” Charles Laughton has said of *The Night of the Hunter*. But, as anyone who has seen this extraordinary film knows, its maker’s description only scratches the surface of this work’s terrors and enchantments. The tale is one of a psychopathic self-styled preacher (Robert Mitchum) who becomes involved with a young widow (Shelley Winters) her children (Billy Chapin and Sally Jane Bruce) and a saintly farm woman (Lillian Gish).

*The Night of the Hunter* has the feel and the force of an American folk fable; yet, it’s a curious and highly eccentric sort of folk fable, mixing, as it does, rural humour with gothic humour, biblical quotation and Freudian symbolism, and everyday realities with a near-mythic confrontation between the forces of good and evil. In short, *The Night of the Hunter* is an American movie classic. It is also an utter original.

This sense of originality was largely lost on movie audiences when *The Night of the Hunter* was first released in 1955. Though the Davis Grubb novel on which the film was based was a bestseller, and critical notices were excellent, audiences shied away from its spectacular horrors set against the bleak vistas of Depression-era America. Clearly, the film had little in common with the Technicolor wide-screen cheeriness of movies which typified the decade. But, just where does *The Night of the Hunter* fit?

It may be frightening, but not in the melodramatic manner of a conventional thriller. Its story is told from a child’s viewpoint, yet it has nothing in common with the likes of Disney or Spielberg. Then, there is its style to contend with—an incredible mixture of naturalistic three-dimensional space on view one moment, replaced by theatrical two-dimensional images the next. It is clear what the film is aiming at: images from our nightmares, brought into the lucid light of day. And, in scene after scene, shot after shot, it succeeds.

No one who has seen *The Night of the Hunter* has ever forgotten its images: the shadow of the preacher suddenly looming up into the window of the children’s bedroom; the body of a murdered woman sitting in a car submerged in a river, her long hair tangled with the river weeds; the silhouette of the preacher on the horizon of the night-time sky, like some ghastly pop-up storybook image

suddenly come to life. Best of all is the incredible lyrical sequence of the children's escape from the preacher in a river raft; their progress observed by spiders, frogs, jackrabbits and other forest creatures seemingly out of some dark enchanted fairy tale.

No doubt that producer Paul Gregory had a large part in guiding this independent production; the cast could not have been better chosen or more creatively involved. Yet, the lion's share of the success of *The Night of the Hunter* clearly must go to Charles Laughton. Though the British-born character actor was known to audiences the world over for his work in such films as *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the acting community knew him as a director and teacher as well. He took it upon himself to hone into workable shape the vast script which writer James Agee had given him; he worked closely with both the cast and cinematographer Stanley Cortez on the images—most of which involved complex lighting and photographic effects.

But, for all its visual wonders, *The Night of the Hunter* is not a film of images alone. Laughton was first and foremost an actor's director. From the sensitivity of the children's performances to the pathos of Shelley Winters' widow, to the broad humour of the character turns by Evelyn Varden and James Gleason, every acting moment counts. Most important of all, of course, are the portrayals of Mitchum and Gish. The screen had never seen the likes of villainy as embodied by Mitchum (not until Dennis Hopper in *Blue Velvet*). As for Gish, she radiates from the screen here in a manner even D. W. Griffith was unable to capture.

It's a perfect match—the “false prophet” Mitchum versus the true Christian. As they face-off in the film's unforgettable climax, the message of *The Night of the Hunter* comes through with crystal clarity. Evil is abroad in the world. Children must bear its brunt, but, as the film's heroine says, “They abide, they endure.” And, so does *The Night of the Hunter*.

David Ehrenstein

### **Our previous presentation:**

Based on the feedback slips returned on the night, you rated *Bastards*, screened on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 3.17 stars out of 5 from 28 responses. Please visit the current season page at <http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk> to read all the feedback comments.

You can still provide feedback on this, or any other film, by visiting the Discussions page (<http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk/discussion/>).

### **Our next presentation:**

*The Selfish Giant* will be shown on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> April, starting at 8:00pm.