



*The* FILM OFTEN REGARDED AS THE SCARIEST MOVIE EVER MADE ARRIVES ON BLU-RAY.  
THE MAN WHO STARTED IT ALL TAKES STOCK OF ITS LASTING LEGACY.

# He *is* Legion

WILLIAM PETER BLATTY *revisits*  
THE EXORCIST

*by* JOHN W. BOWEN

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**HE 1970s ARE RIGHTLY REMEMBERED AS THE DAWN OF THE BLOCKBUSTER ERA.** *JAWS* (1975) AND *STARS WARS* (1977) SHATTERED BOX OFFICE RECORDS AND, PERHAPS MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, PERMANENTLY ALTERED THE VERY NATURE OF MOVIE MARKETING. BUT SEVERAL YEARS EARLIER, IT WAS *THE EXORCIST* THAT SHOOK THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH, WITH ITS NOW-ICONIC TALE OF THE DEMONICALLY POSSESSED YOUNG GIRL REGAN MAC-NEIL (LINDA BLAIR), HER DISTRAUGHT MOTHER CHRIS (ELLEN BURSTYN) AND TWO PRIESTS (JASON MILLER AND MAX VON SYDOW AS FATHER KARRAS AND FATHER MERRIN, RESPECTIVELY) DETERMINED TO DRIVE THE DEMON OUT. THE STORY – SET IN WASHINGTON, DC – IS FLESHED OUT WITH A HOMICIDE DETECTIVE (LEE J. COBB) INVESTIGATING THE GRUESOME DEATH OF A FILM DIRECTOR (JACK MCGOWRAN), WITH CLOSE TIES TO THE GIRL'S MOTHER.

Adapted for the screen by William Peter Blatty from his own best-selling novel and directed by William Friedkin, it created a sensation – occasionally crossing the line into outright hysteria – that has never been matched. With figures properly adjusted for inflation, it remains the highest-grossing R-rated movie in history, and the most profitable film of any kind to date for Warner Bros. Not surprisingly, on the eve of its newest special edition reissue, the now 82-year-old Blatty, who also produced the film, is as proud and confident of its power as ever.

"Each time the film has been re-released, it has drawn a huge audience," he says in an exclusive interview with *Rue Morgue*. "As you will see with the release of the Blu-ray, thanks to Billy Friedkin's direction, it is in no respect even slightly dated. It looks better than ever in its digital format and, according to a most recent poll [conducted by subscription service LOVEFILM], remains 'The Most Disturbing Film of All Time.'"

Even today, many fans are shocked to learn that Blatty's infamous work was actually a diversion from his career as a comedy writer. Prior to penning *The Exorcist* novel in 1969, he enjoyed a brief but highly successful stint as a comedy screenwriter. His early credits include the Warren Beatty romantic farce *Promise Her Anything* (1965) and several collaborations with powerhouse director Blake Edwards, including the satire *What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?* (1966) and *A*

*Shot in the Dark*, the 1964 sequel to Edwards' smash hit *The Pink Panther*. When Blatty suddenly found himself short of work in the latter part of the decade, he dove headlong into a novel he'd been meaning to write for years, very loosely based on an allegedly true case of demonic possession he had read about in the 1940s. His research on the subject took him well beyond the confines of Christianity itself, let alone the Western world – something that is reflected in the film's opening, when Father Merrin uncovers a small statue of the ancient Sumerian demigod Pazuzu, while on an archaeological dig in Northern Iraq.

Blatty explains, "In the Third World, the phenomenon remains common, whereas in America, in 1969, when I sat down to write the novel, my research had turned up only two definite cases in which the Catholic Church had authorized the solemn and formal rite of exorcism. One in Maryland and another in Earling, Iowa, and a possible third in Cleveland, Ohio. ... From the beginnings of recorded history, including written chronicles of possession and rites of exorcism in ancient Egypt, and in every part of the world, possession has been uniformly described in terms of its symptoms, and if it is a mental illness, it has always been one for which psychiatry has never had a name."

The struggle to overcome the skepticism of both the medical community and the Church is a key point in the story, as Old World super-

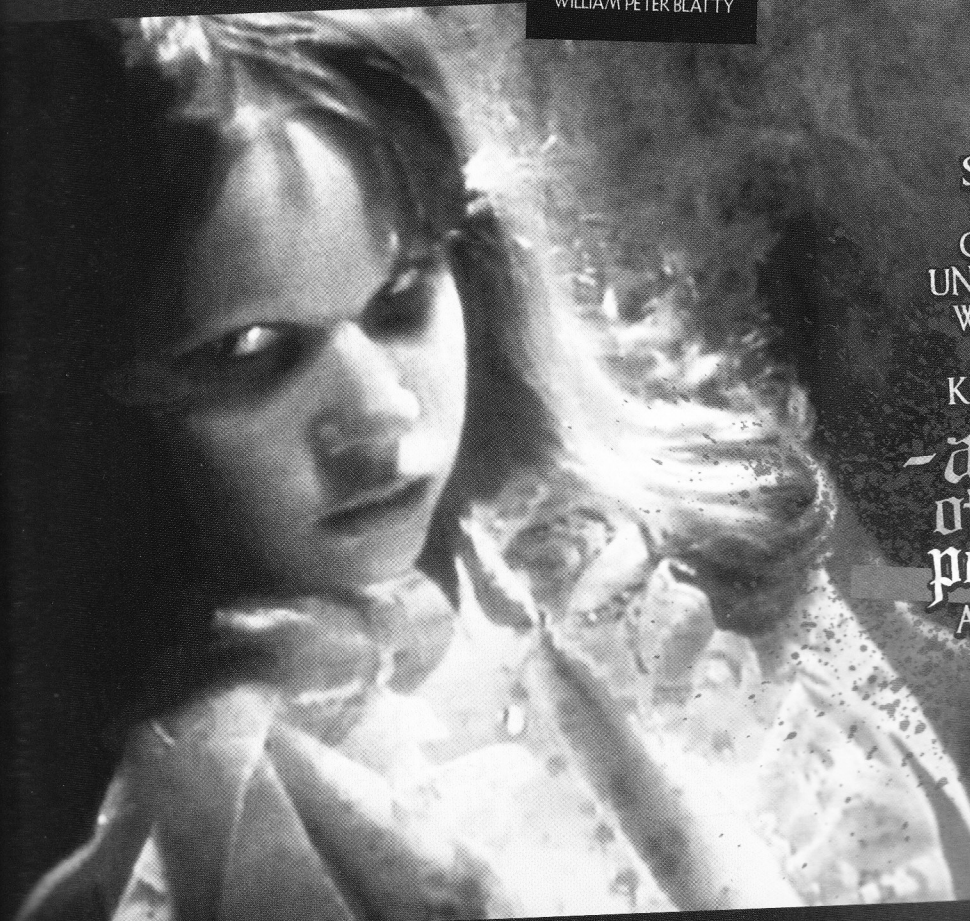
**THE EXORCIST**



WILLIAM PETER BLATTY

“ THERE MAY BE SOMETHING IN THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS IN WHICH THERE LURKS A KNOWLEDGE - and fear - of demonic possession AS SOMETHING FROM WHICH NO ONE IS SAFE. ”

William Peter Blatty



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*Battle Of Wills: Director William Friedkin (left) and writer/producer William Peter Blatty on the set of the film, and (below) Father Merrin (Max Von Sydow) attempts to drive out the demon.*



stition proves to be real in the face of modernity. The rigorous insistence on denying the supernatural until it defeats logic is what makes the tale so terrifying. It strips away belief in a psychological explanation (e.g. when Regan, the possessed girl, is subjected to medical tests that prove useless), until only a terrifying spiritual explanation remains. Blatty believes that there's actually a crossover point between the spiritual and the more purely psychological.

"The Catholic Church's caution in such matters is hardly anything new," he offers. "For example, it once put out an official warning to would-be exorcists that people who were either assessed as being possessed, or declared themselves possessed, were 'far more in need of a doctor than of a priest.' That warning was issued at the Council of Reims in the year 1582. Summing up, there may be something in the collective unconscious in which there lurks a knowledge, and fear, of demonic possession as something from which no one is safe, though I believe that this is light years from the case. Theoretically, and based upon no facts whatever, I have a suspicion that an alien intelligence could never take control of a human organism unless that person's personality had been shattered, allowing for the entry of, well, let's say 'something' inasmuch as there have been recorded cases of benign possession, as well as the Jewish tradition of *dybukks*, the souls of the restless and unanchored departed. But that 'something' – again, just my wild opinion – might find the opening it needs due to either a pre-existing serious mental illness, or due to the heavy use of drugs."

Here, however, it would seem that the writer is rather uncharacteristically selling himself short. Blatty's theories on possession, and our willingness to accept them just enough to become engrossed in the novel and/or film, certainly do hinge upon finding an overlap between the physical and the metaphysical, but all would be for naught if his writing skills failed to rise to the task. Instead of demanding that we reassess our own beliefs (*The Omen*, anyone?), Blatty simply persuades us to step into his own belief system just long enough to become completely immersed

in his tale, outlandish as it may be.

Of course, it was a very successful tactic; *The Exorcist* found a publisher almost immediately and Warner bought the film rights – with the stipulation that Blatty would write the script and produce, even before the book was released.

However, despite the novel's almost-instant bestseller status, and as unimaginable as it may seem today, the film project was initially turned down by a veritable who's who of big-name directors including Arthur Penn (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *Little Big Man*), Peter Bogdanovich (*The Last Picture Show*, *Targets*), Mike Nichols (*The Graduate*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*) and John Boorman (*Deliverance* and – much later – the regrettable *Exorcist II: The Heretic*). No less a demigod than Stanley Kubrick expressed serious interest, but Warner Bros, wary of his notoriety for going over time and budget, passed on him in favour of Mark Rydell (*The Cowboys*, *On Golden Pond*). Blatty, however, steadfastly held out for William Friedkin, a recently hot property after winning the 1972 Best Director Oscar for *The French Connection*.

Historically, Blatty and Friedkin remain one of cinema's most enduring creative odd couples; they became close friends as production progressed, although their relationship was frequently stormy, largely due to Friedkin's ferocious temper and egotism. Both men were fiercely devoted to their recently deceased mothers; both were skirt-chasers who sometimes competed for the attentions of the same women. It has long been widely speculated in critical and academic circles that *The Exorcist* owes much of its success to having been written by a devout if world-weary Catholic and directed by an agnostic Jew.

Blatty himself puts great stock in this theory. "It's one of the two primary reasons I wanted Friedkin," he maintains. "The

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