

# The Star-Ledger

## What horror movies taught me about new fatherhood

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Last year, not long after my wife and I brought our newborn son home from the hospital, he began staring at empty parts of our apartment.

He'd be in my lap when he'd lock onto an unoccupied corner. His gaze would then travel up, unblinking, until he'd freeze midway across the ceiling.

It reminded me of Vera Farmiga walking into a haunted house in "The Conjuring," her eyes drifting to an evil spirit only she could see. I'm less concerned about the spirits in our home because after looking at the ceiling my son would giggle.

I've watched a lot of horror movies since becoming a dad. I'm not sure why.

There is an element of catharsis. No matter how many 3 a.m. bottles I endure, watching a ghost vomit into a woman's mouth reminds me some people have it worse.

Horror does include a surprising number of lessons parents need to teach.

"Hereditary" shows the danger of sticking your head out of a moving car. "Alien" and "Night of the Creeps" warn against putting new things in your mouth. "Cabin in the Woods," "The Evil Dead" and "The Thing" would have ended differently if people hadn't touched other people's stuff.

Sometimes movies offer conflicting advice.

When our son is eventually granted screen time, what do we do if he discovers a girl trapped in the TV? "Poltergeist" says to get her out, while "The Ring" suggests leaving her there.

Many stories feature children possessed by demons. A possessed kid in "Sinister" runs over a family with a lawnmower. Considering how sleep deprivation feels, that lawnmower sometimes sounds pretty good.

I haven't seen any movies about demons in babies. ("Rosemary's Baby" doesn't count.) Are demons interested in babies? My son already growls, vomits and chants in an unknown language. If he is ever possessed I'm not sure I'd notice.

Childhood certainly has its share of horror. You don't know what can hurt you.

I was standing near my son one day when I lifted up an empty trash bag and snapped it down to open it. He lost his mind. The kid had no idea plastic could "pop" and morph into a bulbous dementor. As it happens, plastic bags can kill him.

He's not always scared by surprises. Whether a shock leads to wailing or laughter seems to depend on how safe he feels. When he's lying alone, peekaboo is risky. Even if we've been playing for a while.

For infants, any adult leaping from behind a couch must be like watching that "Twilight Zone" scene where Dan Aykroyd covers his face with his hands, pauses, and then looks up to reveal he's transformed in a way I should discuss with a therapist.

Yet my son loves jump scares if he's in someone's arms. We first tried this when he was only a few months old. My wife held him. I lunged. We'd never seen him laugh so hard.

The line between comedy and horror is thin. The comedian-turned-horror-maestro Jordan Peele has spoken at length about how moving from "Key & Peele" to "Get Out" was easier than it looked because jokes and scares share similar structures.

You can see this when comparing scenes from "The Office" and "A Quiet Place" that both feature the actor John Krasinski.

There's a moment in "The Office" when Krasinski slides into view behind his bloviating supervisor, in the background and out of focus. We safely assume he finds his boss as absurd as we do, and the familiarity is funny. The same technique triggers the opposite effect in "A Quiet Place." Partway through the film, a strange man rises into view behind Krasinski, in the background and out of focus. We don't know who he is, and it's terrifying.

I'll explain these rules to my son someday. It might help him process Disney.

The director Guillermo del Toro has argued that early Disney films are so effective because they mix comedy with horror. That rings true after re-watching "Snow White." Holy bananas. It opens with a plan to cut out a girl's heart and ends with a lady drinking a human scream before being crushed by a boulder. Other classics are cut from the same cloth. To this day, the boy in "Pinocchio" who brays like a donkey before turning into one is the most haunting thing I've ever seen.

Disney scared me as a kid. But I don't remember being afraid when I watched Universal's old monster movies. Whenever my mom was out of town, my dad would rent the two of us "Frankenstein" or "Bride of Frankenstein" or "Frankenstein: Back 2 The Hood."

The lack of fear couldn't be because those films were in black and white. I saw "Psycho" in high school and had to sleep with a baseball bat.

I think my tranquility had to do with not being alone.