

# 'Gone Girl' Dreadfully Disappoints

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session that culminates in her locking him into the marriage at the end? I could go on -- but suffice it to say that the film did not convince me that people like Amy exist, or illuminate anything about them if they do.

And then there is Nick, himself. We're meant to believe that he is suave and dashing enough to capture Amy in the first place but then a complete plebeian in who he associates with and how he spends his time and in how he deals with vicious, female-driven media hounds (more on that later). He cheats on Amy with a younger student and lays around the house playing video games and having no ambition. Yet Amy is obsessed with him.

You would think this world filled with diabolical women torturing poor, hapless Nick was dreamed up by a man -- but, as people are quick to point out when I and others criticize this film, the writer of both the screenplay and the best-selling novel on which it is based is a woman, Gillian Flynn, who even describes herself as a feminist.

Flynn has noticed that, despite the acclaim that both the novel and the film have received, both have garnered criticism for being anti-feminist and trading in a host of negative stereotypes about women. She dismisses these criticisms lightly (as in a New York Times interview this month), suggesting that she is actually advancing a more nuanced view of women by creating a really interesting female villain. She suggests in a 2013 interview in *The Guardian* that her writing seeks to move us (meaning feminists? pop culture generally?) beyond the need for women only to be innately nurturing and to recognize that women, like men, can be pragmatically evil and cunning. Somehow this is going to sharpen our cultural view of women, or make it more sophisticated.

I find Flynn's response to criticism to be self-serving and disingenuous. There is no glut of women heroes in our cultural conversation -- indeed, a recent study found that the top-grossing films feature only 15 percent women protagonists, heroic or otherwise -- and, even if there were a glut of women heroes, its antidote would not be to create more diabolical female villains -- particularly villains that trade in already virulent stereotypes about women as liars and cunning manipulators.

I also think that Flynn shows a remarkable lack of awareness about the implications of the fact that, as an attractive, white, well-educated woman in, by all accounts, a happy straight marriage, she writes from a position of relative social, psychological, and financial safety, about a subject that directly threatens the safety of a staggering number of

women who are much less fortunate than she is. Sexual violence and domestic violence toward women is a persistent problem in our society. Abundant evidence suggests that women underreport such crimes and that victims often struggle to be believed when they do report. Yet evidence also suggests that, to an alarming degree, people continue to believe that women regularly lie about both things, despite abundant evidence that false accusations of rape and domestic violence, though they do happen, are relatively rare.

Unlike the world of "Gone Girl," where fooling the trusting police and gullible media with serial false accusations of rape and abuse are Amy's hobby, women at all levels of American culture face the struggle to be believed when they speak up about violence, and those struggles are exaggerated for immigrants, the poor, the disabled, and racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. As for women in positions of influence, we regularly still encounter people's unconscious fear about our ulterior motives and are treated as threatening when we even so much as ask questions that people don't want to entertain.

Given those realities, it is downright irresponsible to make a major blockbuster which peddles a story -- which it treats as psychologically interesting and believable -- in which a career woman with more economic resources than her husband responds to his infidelity and lack of ambition by devising an elaborate ruse (complete with colorful post-it notes) to (a) fake her own disappearance, (b) make him look like an ass in the media, (c) fake her own death so that he will get the death penalty, (d) then changes her mind witlessly when the husband fake-apologizes in the media, (e) then traps a rich former suitor into rescuing her and tells him a bunch of lies about how her husband abused her, (f) then abuses her own sexual organs so that she can frame the suitor for abusing her after she brutally murders him, (g) then returns to Nick and traps him into staying with her by stealing his stored semen to make a hate child with it.

"Gone Girl" indeed tells that story -- and then makes it even more ludicrous by portraying the media and police as readily accepting all of Amy's accusations even though they are full of holes, and adding enough additional vicious women characters to people a small village. They include two particularly noxious women reporters and several other women who, without knowing Amy, join in her plot against Nick by trapping him into appearing to flirt with them on camera.

As I've said, "Gone Girl" did not convince me that women like Amy exist, or that portraying them advances feminist ideals, or any

ideals, for that matter. And we do not live in a world where the response to accusations of sexual assault or domestic violence would be a frenzy of media and police support for the alleged victim.

The fact that feminist criticisms of the film are frequently dismissed as lacking sophistication or as demonstrating an unwillingness to tolerate female villains suggests that we as a culture dramatically underestimate how difficult it is for women to be believed when they report sexual and physical violence, or even for privileged women to carve out a space from which to speak with power without being treated as threatening. Because if we as a culture really understood those realities, we would not view it as playful or even as fair game to trade in the barely hidden fears and prejudices that keep women down, any more than we would view it as playful to make a film about a diabolical welfare-cheating African-American woman too lazy to use her bachelor's degree in accounting to get a job. Please tell me that we would demand that such a film demonstrate an awareness that such a story is highly implausible and promotes dangerous stereotypes. Or don't give Gillian Flynn or director David Fincher the idea to make that film.

*Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer. You can find her movie blog at [opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com](http://opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com).*

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