The Conjuring

R

112 Minutes

Rating: **** out of *****

So you think you like scary movies?
You might want to think again.

The Conjuring, based on the case files of real-life paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren, is nothing if not scary. The story of a family haunted by a particularly evil spirit with plans to kill them all, The Conjuring is almost certainly the most horrifying movie that will be released in 2013.

And it is superbly executed on all counts. Director James Wan lets the unfolding nightmare speak for itself, and dispenses with many of the cheap blood and thunder effects often associated with films of its type. In fact, the whole film looks a lot like a documentary, which is appropriate given that it is based on a supposedly true story. The script treats the subject matter with respect, and while I don’t know if any of the filmmakers are Christian themselves, the plot retains the inherently Christian worldview underlying the narrative from beginning to end. The cast is superb, particularly Vera Farmiga and Patrick Wilson as Lorraine and Ed Warren, the devoutly Catholic couple who spent much of their adult lives investigating supernatural events and helping those plagued by otherworldly afflictions. In many ways, The Conjuring is perfectly made.

But while I give The Conjuring high marks in every fundamental area of filmmaking, it’s still hard for me to recommend it to the general audience without some serious qualifications. As a long-time horror devotee who has watched countless genre films of varying styles and who is always up for a good scare, I have to say that I’m not sure The Conjuring qualifies as a “good” scare. It’s not a monster movie. It’s not a slasher film or really even a ghost story. The “monster” in The Conjuring is something far worse than any of that, and the result is a film that isn’t merely scary but often genuinely disturbing. The fact that it’s based on real-life events and that something at least generally like the movie’s plot really could happen makes it all even more terrifying.

Here’s a good test. If you’ve seen The Exorcist and it didn’t bother you any more than a typical horror film, then you can probably enjoy The Conjuring. Otherwise, you’re probably better advised to spend your money elsewhere.

Again, I’m not saying The Conjuring isn’t well done. It is. Not only is it technically well made, but more importantly it actually conveys a strong pro-Christian message, which is increasingly unusual in the movies today. The plot is involving, the characters exceptionally empathetic and at times the film is genuinely moving in a way few films of any genre often achieve. But for all that, it’s not really an entertaining movie. It’s scary, but it’s not very fun. And I think even a “scary movie” should be entertaining as well. Let the buyer beware!