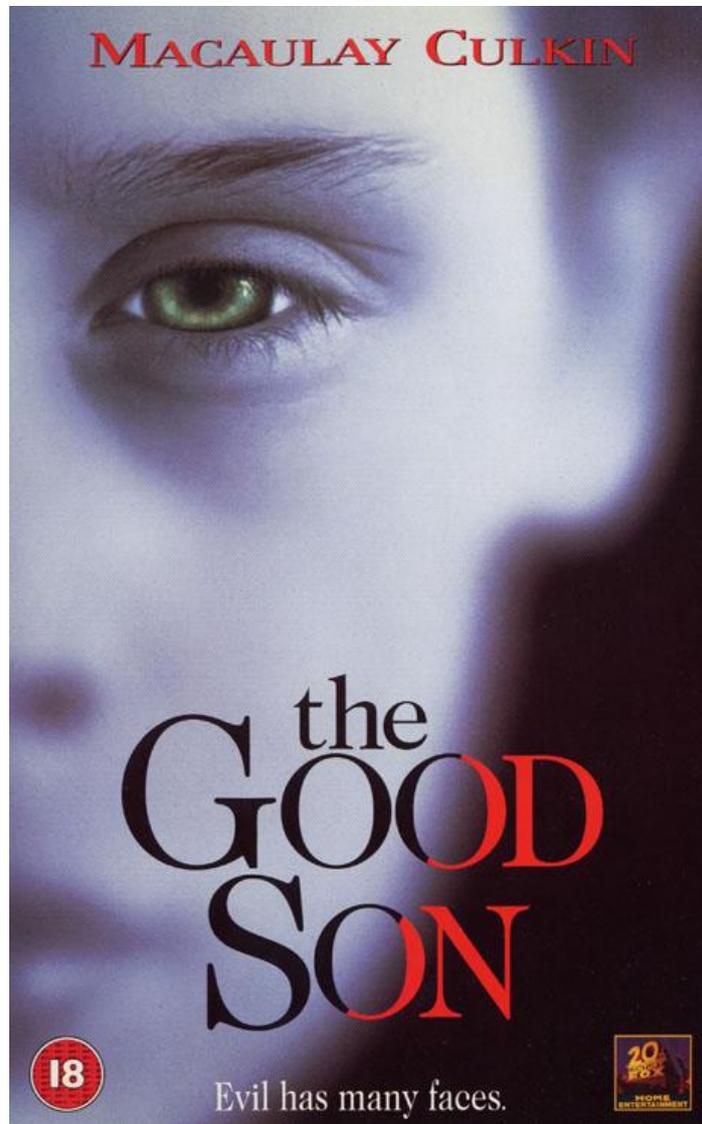


The Good Son

US : 1993 : dir. Joseph Ruben : 20th Century Fox : 107 **or** 86 min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
Macaulay Culkin; Elijah Wood; Quinn Culkin
 Wendy Crewson; David Morse; Daniel Hugh Kelly; Jacqueline Brookes; Ashley Crowe;
 Guy Strauss; Keith Brava; Jerem Goodwin [*sic*]; Andria Hall; Bobby Huber; Mark Stefanich

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 € M ☺	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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“ Evil has many faces ”



*Evil has spooky green eyes – just so we'll recognise it when we see it...
 Source: 20th Century Fox VHS 8553*



Here's another intelligence test for you (you know you love 'em) – one of these boys is a nice, well-mannered child, the other is A MONSTER. You have to guess WHICH IS WHICH. Source: NAMBLA Bulletin

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

“Superficial **"BAD SEED"**-type thriller, which exploitively [*sic*] casts **"HOME ALONE"** star Culkin as an unremorseful, pre-teen sociopath who terrorises his cousin (Wood), among many others. What's next: bringing back Shirley Temple and having her place high-tech explosives on the Good Ship Lollipop? Macaulay's sister Quinn plays his sibling, and his brother Rory can be glimpsed in a key photograph. ** ”

Film Review – November 95 – review:

“Unlucky Wood watches his mum die and then gets shipped off to stay with his aunt and uncle, only to find that his cousin (Culkin) is a killer moppet [*sic*] who doesn't take kindly to having a rival for his mother's affections. While the casting of Culkin as a pre-pubescent psycho is a strong talking point, the **"HOME ALONE"** kid's acting talents are too limited to convince us that there's a devil lurking behind the angelic facade; he can do glazed but not crazed. Consequently **"THE GOOD SON"** suffers from an in-built

credibility problem which director Joseph **"SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY"** Ruben never surmounts. ”

Empire review – and note the contemptuous dislike of boys evident in every breath:

“There is of course something quite satisfying in legitimately disliking Macaulay Culkin, and here, after a series of cutie-pie roles, the überpygmy [*sic*] at last gives us the chance, donning the "nasty" mantle as the death-obsessed infant¹ intent on nailing rival munchkin [*sic*] Elijah Wood. It all begins with Jack – Bill Clinton lookalike Morse – who, shortly after the death of his wife, is obliged to fulfil a two-week business engagement in Tokyo, thus forcing him into an awkward dilemma. Does he [**a**] palm his only son Mark (Wood) off on local friends/relatives, or [**b**] drive 3,000 miles to a craggy outpost in New England and deposit the infuriatingly doe-eyed nipper [*sic*] with the estranged brother who he hasn't seen for ten years?

¹ *Infant ???*

Given that this is a camp thriller, the answer is obvious; as is the reaction of Mark's cousin Henry (Culkin), who after initially extending the hand of friendship to the poor little mite [*sic*], throws a major wobbler when he jealously perceives the interloper to be receiving the better of his parents' affections. And thus what starts out as a little bit of harmless tormenting escalates into all sorts of macabre pranks, like dangling Mark out of a treehouse and throwing life-like dummies in the path of passing motorists. "Accidents will happen" squeaks Henry, screwing his face up and threatening Mark with something far worse if he blubs.

Mark must, of course, fight back and, inevitably, there is a dark secret that motivates Henry's evil shenanigans. Herein lies the problem, for in driving the plot to its obvious conclusion – ie the "good son" overcoming the "evil son" – the protagonists are required to think and act like adults². And while it's difficult at the best of times to be sympathetic towards a bunch of American brats, when you add to the mix namby-pamby parents and a silly clifftop climax, the end result is devoid of tension and often laughable. A good clip around the ear would have sorted out all this nonsense a long time ago³. ** ”

Videocassette – 20th Century Fox VHS 8553
– sleeve notes:

“For Mark Evans (Elijah Wood), the loss of his mother is too much to bear. What Mark needs is friendship and companionship, so in a desperate bid to help him overcome his bereavement he is sent to stay with his cousin Henry (Macaulay Culkin)⁴. But Mark discovers to his horror that his cousin is hiding dark secrets and a wicked mind full of trouble. His idea of fun is both evil and deadly... So deadly that Mark soon finds himself the hunted and on the run in a deadly cat and mouse game of terror! ”

² Why ??

³ It might have helped, in the interests of a balanced review, to assign a critic who didn't harbour a passionate loathing of kids – sorry: “infants”, “munchkins”, “brats”, “uberpygmies”...

⁴ Inaccurate

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993" or "Video Movie Guide 1993"]

Radio Times review:

“Macaulay Culkin may have been cute when he was left **HOME ALONE**”, but there's nothing good about Henry, his character here. It's doubtful whether even Damien's parents would let their son go play with him. Doe-eyed child Elijah Wood is the motherless cousin come to stay with Henry. The film has come straight to video and is certainly not one for the children – though edits were made to get it a certificate.⁵”



*Or let's put it another way – if you had to drop **one** of them into a sheer abyss and certain death, which one would slip through **your** fingers?*

Source: 20th Century Fox VHS 8553

⁵ Note how in Radio Times speak "censor cuts" is translated as "edits". And while we're about it, children in the US "go play", in **this** country they "go and play". We don't need the BBC promoting Americanisation of the language, thanks very much. Isn't Americanisation of our TV culture intrusion enough?

**The Good Son:
"Devoid of
tension."**



Poverty of invention dogs the enterprise throughout. Henry's malice is futilely directed, not toward his schoolmates, but a vicious neighbourhood dog. He later kills the dog, of course, but that only identifies him as a little thug, not as a boy with a psychotic disregard for the well-being of others.

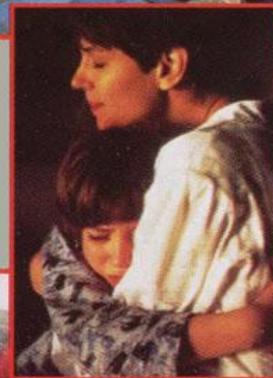
Source: Empire

Behold the woefully-unspanked buttocks of Macaulay Culkin. Judicious battery of said area would solve this problem smartly.

*

Another critic observed that a thick ear would have remedied the situation, but that's only 1990s coding for the same thought. Wrong-headed trends in parenting can produce wrong-headed offspring. The evidence for this is plain enough, but it conflicts with a cherished mantra and so must be disregarded.

Source: Fox VHS 8553



The climax of **"THE GOOD SON"** is just as implausible as **"THE BAD SEED"** (Patty McCormack struck by lightning) but more satisfying. Does the mother save her own flesh and blood – whom she suspects of having killed her other child – or ignore his pleadings and rescue someone else's son? The terrorist will shoot either your wife or your daughter, and you cannot save both, but have only seconds to choose between them. It's a dilemma straight out of the silent melodramas, but no less telling for that.

Source: *Empire*



If I were being uncharitable – who, me? – I might observe that “Evil has many faeces”, and this is an ample dollop to prove it. Essentially a mid-week TV movie masquerading as a feature, it has many faults, but the crucial one is that Macaulay Culkin can't do “evil”. Bratty he can do, standing on his head. Smart-mouthed American kid with an inflated idea of his own importance? No problem with that one either. But, just as with Mark Lester before him in **"NIGHT HAIR CHILD"**, Culkin simply hasn't developed the dramatic range to play a psychopath with any conviction. To be fair to him, this is partly the fault of Ian McEwan's tepid script, and a decidedly wooden directing job by Ruben. The film lacks the least sense of brooding malice, let alone anything to qualify as Grand Guignol **Evil**, but unlike Mark Lester, Culkin was never especially convincing when playing “innocence” either. Even in **"HOME ALONE"**, what came across was a calculating and manipulative little boy able to anticipate adult psychology and play to it whenever it suited him. As Henry Adams in **"THE GOOD SON"**, for the most part he's simply a “no more Mr Nice Guy” Kevin McCallister, in sore need of parental guidance vis-à-vis the seat of his pants.

But long before Culkin makes his first appearance, the film is already on shaky ground. Just 90 seconds in and we're presented with young Mark (Elijah Wood) at his mother's deathbed, ushered there from a soccer match. An inevitably lachrymose scene, it's not badly played by the cast, but comes just too soon into the story to hope for any audience engagement. Wood struggles manfully through the sudsiness of it all, and in no time finds himself chauffeured across country by his dad to be deposited with estranged relatives while dad clinches some important business deal in Japan. Mark is so wracked with guilt and remorse (he'd made his mother a solemn pledge he wouldn't allow her to die) that within an hour of arriving at the house he's hooting and giggling at the dinner table with cousin Henry. This gives a first inkling of the depth of character insight we're to expect, while the sensitive dialogue has all the banality of slow motion tennis: “I love you Mark”; “I love you too Mom”; “I love you Dad”; “I love you too”...

What father in his right mind would build his son a treehouse half a vertical mile from the ground with an overhang that rock-climbers wouldn't tackle without pitons? Well, Henry has one of course, and dangles Mark from it momentarily to give notice he's a Scary Kid. To drive the point home, he also talks in that flat monotone beloved of Gestapo agents and maniac scientists. Mark's preoccupation with death finds unexpected resonance in Henry's clinical observations on death – his younger brother had died mysteriously several years before in a bathtub accident (cue a portrait from the Culkin family album). Henry tempts Mark with tobacco, says dangerous stuff like "Don't fuck with me, Mark!" (a line he never got to use in "**HOME ALONE**"), and causes a freeway pile-up by pitching a life-sized dummy off a crossover bridge. His rationale goes as follows: "Once you realise you can do anything, you're free. You can fly. Nobody can touch you. Nobody." The answer to that, in the teeth of current wisdom, is that it's precisely *because* nobody can touch him that his acts of childish spite are able to spiral ever higher toward the homicidal. Ah but that's *not* the lesson we're meant to draw from all this, goodness me no.

Mark is seeing a woman "therapist" who aims to help him come to terms with his mother's death, but she's so inept that he begins to imprint on Henry's mother as the reincarnate form of his own, which does not bode well for the jealous Henry. Using Mark's protective instincts against him, Henry threatens first his own kid sister Connie (Quinn Culkin) – in a scene all too redolent of the ice-skating death in "**DAMIEN: OMEN II**" – and ultimately his mother, who has begun to suspect his hand in the brother's accident. The film's cliffhanger climax contrives to pitch both boys simultaneously off a sheer precipice, with Henry's mother frantically clutching one wrist of each, her grasp failing moment by moment. Which one will she save? Which one will plummet to a rocky death?

The *Radio Times* review says that "edits were made to get it a certificate" (translation: it was additionally censored for video release) and it would be interesting to know exactly what footage was cut. The scene where Henry kills a ferocious neighbourhood dog with a self-made crossbow seems the most obvious contender, but there's very slim chance that the film's dramatic clout was seriously compromised by those cuts, wherever they fell.

This film generated quite a few column inches in the tabloids before it was ever seen in the UK, firstly due to Culkin Sr's wranglings over the project (the original director, who rightly thought Culkin poorly suited to the role, was sacked and the production put on hold so that Culkin could complete a previous commitment), and secondly because its release coincided unfortunately with a furor surrounding the murder of James Bulger in Liverpool by two young boys, a vicious killing the tabloids claimed (on little evidence) was prompted by their having watched "**CHILD'S PLAY 3**" on video. Consequently, there was a deal of scapegoating of the rental video market, and "**THE GOOD SON**" was never released theatrically in the UK, only becoming available on video in late '95.

"What makes someone evil?" Mark asks his shrink midway through "**THE GOOD SON**". Completely misconstruing the question to reflect upon himself, she replies: "Evil's a word people use when they've given up trying to understand someone". Not especially profound, you'll grant, but it's a sentiment which ought to be carved on the wooden forehead of every journalist from here to Kathmandu. Perhaps a better answer would have been: emotionally disturbed people are the ones we rescue from cliff edges; evil people are the ones we gleefully watch plummet to their deaths.

Comparisons to "**THE BAD SEED**" are obvious (the Patty McCormack original was also remade for TV in 1985), but one could just as well point to "**THE OTHER**" (72), another box office dud about twin boys with a morbid preoccupation over death (not least because one of them is in fact dead), "**ALICE, SWEET ALICE**" (77) or "**A LITTLE GAME**" (71). Very few of these evil kiddie thrillers are effective, perhaps because adults balk at drawing a performance of unalloyed wickedness from a child. Wickedness is a state of knowing, whereas most adults' fundamental preconceptions about childhood characterise it as a state

of not knowing. In that sense **"THE EXORCIST"** was a red herring, since the child Reagan in that film was merely a vehicle for a very adult invading personality. Recent news stories – from the Bulger case in Liverpool to the furore surrounding publication of a book on child-murderess Mary Bell – have confronted society with the uncomfortable realisation that children have always been capable of wilfully committing horrendous crimes, yet the instinct remains to grasp for mitigating circumstance rather than acknowledge that children are, after all, no more innocent or wicked than adults. They have the capacity for both, as we all do.

It's at any rate interesting to see Hollywood's two pubertal princes going head-to-head before that long desert of the late-teen years which all boy actors must eventually cross. Three years following **"HOME ALONE"**, Culkin had now attained the ultimate accolade of his name above the title – a distinction many an adult Hollywood star never achieved. In **"JACOB'S LADDER"** (90) – as the dead son "Gabe" – his name was removed from the credits altogether, for reasons unknown. He was now 13, and the kid actor everyone loved to hate. He made **"THE NUTCRACKER"** the same year (to the surprise of many he had trained as a classical dancer) and **"THE PAGEMASTER"**, as a scaredy-cat who finds courage – but where else? – down at his local library. These he followed in 94 with **"GETTING EVEN WITH DAD"**, a dismal outsmart-your-folks comedy, with Ted Danson horribly miscast as his recidivist father, and in 95 **"RICHIE RICH"**, a comic book creation too close for comfort to the media-spun image of Culkin himself. With this indifferent legacy of vehicles behind him he pitched off that deeper precipice, taking his millions with him, and the world gave a wry sneer of relief to see the back of such an insufferable young smartass. Whether he ever had the capacity to deliver a truly fine dramatic performance is something we shall never know, but his playing on the London stage a few years later was generally well received by critics.

Elijah Wood's list of film credits has scarcely been more inspired. Also 13, he attracted complimentary reviews for his playing in **"PARADISE"** and **"RADIO FLYER"**, but after being miscast, if delightful, in the title role of Disney's **"THE ADVENTURES OF HUCK FINN"** in 94, he had the box office albatross of **"NORTH"** hung about his neck, and in 96 worsened the situation with a tepid remake of **"FLIPPER"** (the working title of which was **"SANDY"**). In between times he co-starred with Kevin Costner in **"THE WAR"** (Costner very generously taking second billing to him), but the public were fatigued with Vietnam-war-syndrome dramas, and that film too did poor box office. The saying has it in Hollywood that you're only as good as your last movie. If that's the case, Elijah was not being well served by his agent. In 98 he turned up, further down the cast list, in the asteroid collision movie **"DEEP IMPACT"**, and then salvation came his way from New Zealand, when he landed the plum central role of Frodo Baggins in the mega-budget trilogy **"THE LORD OF THE RINGS"**. Elijah never quite displayed the charisma of a River Phoenix or Leonardo DiCaprio, but he was always pleasingly modest and engaging on screen and, as the prettiness fades away, he will have to be more discerning in his screen roles if he is to stay the course as an adult star.

See subject index under **ALL IN THE FAMILY, THE CHILD AS EVIL IN OUR MIDST** and **DEATH / DYING CHILDREN**.