



The Bad Seed

By William March

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Now reissued – William March's 1954 classic thriller that's as chilling, intelligent and timely as ever before. This paperback reissue includes a new P.S. section with author interviews, insights, features, suggested reading and more.

What happens to ordinary families into whose midst a child serial killer is born? This is the question at the center of William March's classic thriller. After its initial publication in 1954, the book went on to become a million-copy bestseller, a wildly successful Broadway show, and a Warner Brothers film. The spine-tingling tale of little Rhoda Penmark had a tremendous impact on the thriller genre and generated a whole perdurable crop of creepy kids. Today, *The Bad Seed* remains a masterpiece of suspense that's as chilling, intelligent, and timely as ever before.

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Editorial Review

Review

“William March knows where human fears and secrets are buried. . . . Nowhere is this gift better displayed than in *The Bad Seed*.” —*The New York Times*

“An impeccable tale of pure evil.” —*The Atlantic*

About the Author

William March (1893-1954) was born in Mobile, Alabama, attended Valparaiso University in Indiana, and studied law at the University of Alabama. He served in the Marine Corps during World War I and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the Navy Cross, and the Croix de Guerre with Palm. After the war, he took a job with the Waterman Steamship Corporation, and worked there for eighteen years before giving up his position to devote himself to writing. March published three volumes of stories and six novels, including *The Bad Seed*, his final book.

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Foreword

by Anna Holmes

I suppose if a novelist is going to imagine and give life to a character meant to be a memorable but also totally unexpected serial killer, it makes sense that he make her not only a young child but also a girl. Though readers may be more familiar with Macaulay Culkin’s apple-cheeked child psycho in 1993’s *The Good Son*, the grade-school sociopath to which all contemporary child killers can, and should, be compared is Rhoda Penmark, the focus of William March’s 1954 bestselling novel, *The Bad Seed*. Eight years old, with straight brown hair and a desire for tidiness that seems to border on the obsessive, Rhoda boasts an old-fashioned name and a stereotypically feminine, highly controlled style of dress and disposition that seem to be at extreme odds with her willingness to, for example, toss terrier puppies to their deaths from bedroom windows. And she’s driving her mother, the overly cautious housewife Christine Penmark, literally crazy.

Of course, it’s not just animals who invoke the wrath of Rhoda P., *Kid Creep*: Children and adults alike are subject to her special form of homicidal dispensation, giving lie to the nineteenth century nursery rhyme that little girls are made of “sugar and spice and everything nice.” Indeed, it’s likely that part of what made *The Bad Seed* so terrifying and unsettling to midcentury American readers is author William March’s juxtaposition of the younger Penmark’s external performance of obedient, coquettish femininity—“Oh, my old-fashioned little darling!” exclaims one of Rhoda’s admirers, her neighbor Monica Breedlove, early on in the text—with what are commonly thought to be more masculine traits: the covetousness, ruthlessness, and lack of control that inspire most of her calculated crimes of convenience. This dissonance between how Rhoda appears on the outside and who she is on the inside is further underscored by her aforementioned appearance, all pressed dotted-Swiss dresses and trimmed bangs and perfectly twisted pigtails.

About those pigtails. In the film version of the book, released in 1956, Mr. March’s Rhoda, she of the “straight, finespun, and...dark, dull brown” hair, is reimagined as a towheaded terror in the form of actress Patty McCormack, who received an Academy Award nomination for her performance. Director Mervyn

LeRoy's choice to take a page from Alfred Hitchcock's playbook and make the celluloid Rhoda a blonde served to accentuate not just the character's iciness but to communicate a certain innocence and fragility, making her appear more like a doll than a flesh-and-blood human being. Indeed, the film version feels prescient in the ways that it seems to presage and anticipate any number of scary killer dolls from cinematic history, including the braided moppets from the 1963 *Twilight Zone* episode "Living Doll" and 2013's paranormal thriller *The Conjuring*. Descriptions of Rhoda's appearance and countenance in the book reinforce this: She walks stiffly and somewhat carefully; her hair is arranged in the sort of perfectly ordered, taut plaits that only a factory assembly line could produce; and she seems to be capable of two, maybe three expressions—blank solemnity, irresistible cuteness, and flashing anger.

Though not exactly a character study, it's possible that William March's criminalizing of a young female was supposed to be both provocative and maybe even political, that in making an adorable little girl an ice-cold killer somehow our ideas of femininity and decorum and preciousness were going to be upended, and violently. (It was the mid-1950s, after all, a time in which expectations for womanhood and the cultivation of comfortable, safe domestic arrangements were at an all-time high, expectations that came under fire in Betty Friedan's seminal *The Feminine Mystique*, published less than a decade later.) It's unlikely, however, that the film would have the same deleterious effect on the contemporary reading or theater-going public, as familiar with and desensitized as it is to the concept of the multiple murderess. (This might explain why, when Hostel director Eli Roth considered doing a remake of *The Bad Seed*, he made it clear that he wanted lots of blood and gore—there isn't any in either the film or the book—explaining to interviewers that he thought Rhoda deserved the sort of horror icon status enjoyed by the character Chucky from *Child's Play*, an actual killer doll. "We are going to bastardize and exploit it, ramping up the body counts and killings," he told *Variety* in 2004.)

But reading *The Bad Seed*, one eventually gets the sense that Mr. March is not so much celebrating expressions of female power and agency as fearing them; his contempt for the other female characters he's created is palpable. (The men in the book are, for the most part, emasculated, impotent, or completely invisible.) There is Hortense Daigle, the drunk, hysterical, and smothering mother of one of Rhoda's young victims, Claude Daigle; Mrs. Breedlove, a busybody neighbor who prides herself on her understanding of human behavior yet remains blind to the psychological monstrosity standing in front of her; and, of course, the anxious, selfless Christine Penmark, the person considered responsible for her daughter's misdeeds—Christine's own mother was a psycho killer, March explains, meaning that the evil is matrilineal—and seemingly unable to stop them.

This is where Mr. March's book is most problematic. The esteemed feminist and literary critic Elaine Showalter, in an introduction to a 1997 HarperCollins edition of the book, explains that "as in much of March's writing, women in *The Bad Seed* are more sinister than men," and though she swats him for the book's implicit message that at the root of much conflict and societal upheaval are "castrating wives and mothers," Showalter does not go far enough in indicting him for these and other hoary tropes he traffics in, including but not limited to the clueless gossip; the prim, status-obsessed educator; and of course, Rhoda herself, a femme fatale who becomes the object of affection even to those who ought to fear her most. "In a sense, he was in love with the little girl," writes Mr. March about Leroy Jessup, an apartment-building janitor whom Rhoda will eventually burn to death in a highly disturbing scene during the book's denouement. "His persecution of her, his nagging concern with everything she did, was part of a perverse and frightened courtship." As Showalter herself puts it, one could say the same about the relationship between the author of *The Bad Seed* himself and the grotesque version of femininity he imagined and then committed to paper.

It probably says something about the evolution in attitudes about gender and girlhood—not to mention mental illness and sociopathy—that William March's book would be unlikely to have the same chilling or

shocking effect were it published for the first time today. For one thing, our ideas about good and evil have been complicated and expanded upon thanks to advances in the fields of psychology and criminology, not to mention child development. For another, broadened expectations for women and girls mean that, for better or worse, we are seen as more fully realized human beings, not cartoonish ciphers that either adhere to or reject conventional ideas about what females are capable of. If there's anything in *The Bad Seed* that resonates strongly today, it's the ways in which acts of violence are celebrated as legitimate responses to thwarted entitlement. But that's part of the problem with America, not with its boys (or girls)

One

Later that summer, when Mrs. Penmark looked back and remembered, when she was caught up in despair so deep that she knew there was no way out, no solution whatever for the circumstances that encompassed her, it seemed to her that June seventh, the day of the Fern Grammar School picnic, was the day of her last happiness, for never since then had she known contentment or felt peace.

The picnic was an annual, traditional affair held on the beach and among the oaks of Benedict, the old Fern summer place at Pelican Bay. It was here that the impeccable Fern sisters had been born and had lived through their languid, eventless summers. They had refused to sell the old place, and had kept it up faithfully as a gesture of love even when necessity made them turn their town house into a school for the children of their friends. The picnic was always held on the first Saturday of June since the eldest of the three sisters, Miss Octavia, was convinced, despite the occasions on which it had rained that particular day, and the picnic had to be held inside after all, that the first Saturday of June was an invariably fine one.

"When I was a little girl, as young as many of you are today," she would say each season to her pupils, "we always planned a picnic at Benedict for the first Saturday of June. All our relatives and friends came—some of whom we'd not seen for months. It was sort of a reunion, really, with laughter and surprises and gentle, excited voices everywhere. Everyone had a happy, beautiful day. There was no dissension on those days; a quarrel was unknown in the society of the well-bred, a cross word never exchanged between ladies and gentlemen. My sisters and I remember those days with love and great longing."

At this point Miss Burgess Fern, the middle sister, the practical one who handled the business affairs of the school, said, "It was so much easier in those days, with a houseful of servants and everybody helpful and anxious to please. Mother and some of the servants would drive down to Benedict a few days in advance of the picnic, sometimes as early as the first of June, when the season was officially open, although the established residents of the coast didn't consider the season really in swing until the day of our picnic."

"Benedict is such a beautiful spot," said Miss Claudia Fern. "Little Lost River bounds our property on the Gulf side, and flows into the bay there." Miss Claudia taught art in the school, and automatically she added, "The landscape at that point reminds one so much of those charming river scenes by Bombois." Then, feeling that some of her pupils might not know who Bombois was, she went on. "For the sake of some of the younger groups, Bombois is a modern French primitive. Oh, he is so cunning in his artlessness! So right in his composition, and in the handling of green! You'll learn much about Bombois later on."

It was from the Fern town house, the school itself, that the picnickers were to begin their long day of pleasure; and the parents of each pupil had been asked to have their particular child on the school lawn not later than eight o'clock, when the chartered busses were scheduled to leave. Thus it was that Mrs. Christine Penmark, who disliked being late or keeping others waiting, set her clock for six, which, she felt, would

allow time for her ordinary tasks of the morning and for the remembrance of those last-minute, hurried things which are so easily overlooked.

She had impressed the hour on her mind, saying to herself as she fell asleep, "You will awake precisely at six o'clock, even if something happens to the alarm"; but the alarm went off promptly, and, yawning a little, she sat up in bed. It was, she saw instantly, to be a beautiful day—the day Miss Octavia had promised. She pushed back her blond, almost flaxen, hair and went at once to the bathroom, staring at herself in the mirror for a long moment, her toothbrush held languidly in her hand, as though she were not quite decided what to do with it. Her eyes were gray, wide-set, and serene; her skin tanned and firm. She drew back her lips in that first tentative, trial smile of the day; and standing thus in front of her mirror, she listened absently to the sounds outside her window: an automobile starting in the distance, the twittering of sparrows in the live oaks that lined the quiet street, the sound of a child's voice raised suddenly and then hushed. Then, coming awake quickly, in possession once more of her usual energy, she bathed and dressed and went to her kitchen to begin breakfast.

Later she went to her daughter's room to waken her. The room was empty, and it was so tidy that it gave the impression not having been used for a long time. The bed was nearly remade, the dressing-table immaculate, with each object in its accustomed place, turned at its usual angle. On a table near the window was one of the jigsaw puzzles that her daughter delighted in, a puzzle only half completed. Mrs. Penmark smiled to herself and went into the child's bathroom. The bathroom was as orderly as the bedroom had been, with the bath towel spread out precisely to dry; and Christine, seeing these things laughed softly, thinking: I never deserved such a capable child. When I was eight years old, I doubt if I could do anything. She went into the wide, elaborate hall with its elegant, old-fashioned parquet floors of contrasting woods, and called gaily, "Rhoda! Rhoda! . . . Where are you, darling? Are you up and dressed so soon?"

The child answered in her slow, cautious voice, as though the speaking of words were a perilous thing to be debated. "Here I am," she said. "Here, in the living-room."

When speaking of her daughter, the adjectives that others most often used were "quaint," or "modest," or "old-fashioned"; and Mrs. Penmark, standing in the doorway, smiled in agreement and wondered from what source the child had inherited her repose, her neatness, her cool self-sufficiency. She said, coming into the room, "Were you really able to comb and plait your hair without my helping you?"

The child half turned, so that her mother could inspect her hair, which was straight, finespun, and of a dark, dull brown: her hair was plaited precisely in two narrow braids which were looped back into two thin hangman-nooses, and were secured, in turn, with two small bows of ribbon. Mrs. Penmark examined the bows, but seeing they were compact and firmly tied, she brushed her lips over the child's brown bangs, and said, "Breakfast will be ready in a moment. I think you'd better eat a good breakfast today as there's nothing more uncertain about a picnic than the arrival of lunch."

Rhoda sat down at the table, her face fixed in an expression of solemn innocence; then she smiled at some secret thought of her own, and at once there was a shallow dimple in her left cheek. She lowered her chin and raised it thoughtfully; she smiled again, but very softly, an odd, hesitant smile that parted her lips this time and showed the small, natural gap between her front teeth.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Maryanna Kuhns:

The experience that you get from *The Bad Seed* is a more deep you rooting the information that hide in the words the more you get thinking about reading it. It does not mean that this book is hard to know but *The Bad Seed* giving you joy feeling of reading. The author conveys their point in a number of way that can be understood through anyone who read this because the author of this book is well-known enough. That book also makes your personal vocabulary increase well. Making it easy to understand then can go together with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We highly recommend you for having this *The Bad Seed* instantly.

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