

KNIVES OUT

WRITTEN BY: Rian Johnson

DIRECTED BY: Rian Johnson

STARRING: Daniel Craig, Chris Evans, Ana de Armas, Jamie Lee Curtis, Michael Shannon, Don Johnson, Toni Collette, Lakeith Stanfield, Katherine Langford, Christopher Plummer

RELEASED: September 7, 2019

PLOT OUTLINE

On the day after his 85th birthday, a best-selling author is found dead from his home, seemingly by his own hand. However, someone anonymously hires a well-known private investigator to interview his large, dysfunctional family to discover the complicated truth behind the tragedy.

IN REVIEW

Let's start by saying that I have the utmost respect for Rian Johnson's abilities as both a writer and director. From all of the people in the world who pretty much live on the Internet, I'm willing to bet no one genuinely liked *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* as much as I did; ironically, it was that particular film that earned *Knives Out* the most premature reviewbombing. Then, let's note the basic fact: murder mysteries in the style of Agatha Christie have been adapted to film for decades, and this large array of films has already included every surprise twist in the large, unwritten tome of surprise twists. What these movies, as popular as they are among certain audiences, absolutely need to succeed is an ensemble cast and good advertising. *Knives Out* has both a remarkable ensemble cast – of four generations – and high production values on its side. With that, it's probably a good Sunday whodunit, but in this day and age, can we really be bothered by a two-hour film that'll most likely play out like a bloated episode of *Poirot*?

Enter Rian Johnson and his uncanny sense of smelling a good and unique twist, in this case something to keep even the most hardened fans (and critics) of whodunit mysteries on their toes. After a deliberately "standard" beginning for any story of the type – during which most of the viewers "know exactly what's going on, how's it gonna end" yada, yada, yada – the film throws its epic main twist right to our faces, leaving us absolutely gasping and stunned over the fact that we're less than 40 minutes into a two-hour film. ...And suddenly *Knives Out* turns into one of the most unique and exciting mysteries we've ever watched unfold.

At first, the large Thrombey family seems like a tight-knit group of genuinely good, loving people. However, as the plot unfolds, mostly through flashbacks during the first half, we see this wealthy all-American family for what they really are – a bunch of vain, racist sociopaths living off their late benefactor, some of whom have their own secrets which they might or might not be ready to kill for.

There are no "heroes", or rather, thoroughly upstanding and honest characters in the film – apart from private investigator Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig), who is in full understanding that he is the only player in this whole story with unblemished morals.

The main characters of the film, by all accounts, are the late Harlan Thrombey (Christopher Plummer) and his young nurse, the Brazilian immigrant Marta (Ana de Armas), who knew the former better than anyone else, and was also privy to the dark secrets within the family. After Harlan's death, Marta is pushed aside by the family who have sworn to look after her, since she no longer matters: only Harlan's will does. Thus, Marta becomes our eyes into the real darkness within the Thrombey family, and the true nature of these altogether vile, selfish people, early on in the film. As the main twist of the film presents itself, Marta's true importance to the whole story becomes carved in stone. Craig's Blanc might not be the main character of the film, but the whole story wouldn't move forward without his support. Craig and de Armas luckily have great chemistry despite coming from such different backgrounds in cinema.

As for the family's casting, there's no bigger surprise than Chris Evans, Captain America himself, cast as Harlan's absolutely good-for-nothing grandson Ransom. Perhaps in another deliberate move, Evans truly joins the film in a quite late phase; while the true nature of individual members of the Thrombey family has already been outed, Ransom is introduced as the worst of them all, a polar opposite to Evans' most famous and acclaimed role. If even all of the other characters in the film hate him, we can already be sure we're not going to exactly love him either – but there is certain depth to this character that makes us sympathetic towards him, and it's not the fact that we know him as an Avenger. Thus far typecast in comic book roles, Evans is a better actor than he is usually given credit for, and I'm glad he gets to show off his hidden repertoire here in a much more down-to-Earth film, especially as such a villainous presence.

Two more things before I leave you to check this magnificent piece of film out for yourselves; the editing and pacing of the film are simply perfect. Crossing flashbacks with current events on such a steady pace is a bold move in film making; it can either serve the film or ruin it altogether, rarely anything in the between. In the worst case, using flashbacks that cross over with each other, in particular, make the film impossible to follow. That's certainly not the case here – the flashbacks support the plot 100%, they are perfectly placed, they cross over perfectly, and the storyline wouldn't function without them. The film never stops to explain already established twists more than once, it never repeats itself despite reusing the same scenes and shots from different perspectives; there's always something essentially new about these rehashed clips, and the film manages to retain a high level of excitement throughout the line.

As for the mystery itself, for once I find myself completely surprised and satisfied by its conclusion. That's extremely rare; some of my favourite mystery stories of all time, be they of any genre or any medium,

have offered great plots that have ended in superficially brilliant but thoroughly mediocre solutions, which are sometimes punched full of holes. You can tell this one was polished for a number of years. I only hope that the future sequels – with Craig signed on to reprise his role as Benoit Blanc – will be written as carefully. If so, *Knives Out* might just become one of the best film franchises of the 21st century, and certainly the best in its genre.

9.5