

Film of the week



Man on a mission: Ben Affleck is on top form as Nick Dunne, the husband whose wife has disappeared

It's a killer thriller chick flick

SOME films can hardly be described at all without risking spoilers ("when the flying saucer lands..." whoops!) and *Gone Girl* is pre-eminent among them.

If you still haven't read Gillian Flynn's novel, despite the fact that it has come second only to *Fifty Shades* as a bestseller since it was published two years ago, and you intend to see the film, you should probably, for maximum enjoyment, avoid reading or watching anything at all about it until afterwards. Not that you'll be able to shut your ears to people nattering about it on the bus ("that bit where you realise he's not actually human at all..." aargh! Sorry).

Is it worth seeing? Sure. It's a relationship thriller, entertaining if overlong (nearly two-and-a-half hours), set in contemporary, middle-class America, starring Ben Affleck, 42, who's great in it, and the English actress Rosamund Pike, 35, the Bond girl in *Die Another Day*, who's nearly as good. It's directed by David Fincher, whose films include *Se7en*, *Fight Club*, *Panic Room*, *Zodiac*, *The Social Network* and the American version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and he has worked hard to make it as serious and noir-ish as it possibly could be. That's all you need to know. Bye now! See you afterwards maybe.

Whether or not you love David Fincher's cinematic version of Gillian Flynn's bestseller depends on whether you've read her book – and what sex you are

David
Sexton



GONE GIRL
Cert 18, 148 mins?
★★★★☆

Those who have read the book, even without now recalling every twist and turn, will have a very different experience of the film, not being taken in by its apparent scenarios at any point. Even if you only vaguely remember it (you read it on a plane, after all, or on a beach, even if it wasn't very long ago) you'll soon recollect what's really going on – and at that point your pleasure in it will decline from being held in tight suspense to just seeing how well it's been adapted and whether or not it matches up to your imagination of it. Put it another way: properly enjoying *Gone Girl* is an experience you can only have once, whether you come to it first through the film or the book – it won't work the same way for you twice.

And it's not just a question of sus-

pense either but of the whole emotional balance of the story. For *Gone Girl* grabs you by making you first believe one thing, then another, quite the opposite. It's that woman! No, it's that man! And thus, whether as a reader or viewer, you have your world rocked, as the people in the story do by what happens.

If you never do think it's one, then the other, but know from the off, then the crucial message – that you can never be quite sure what's going on in the mind even of the person you have been married to for years – is lost and replaced by a much plainer exposition of guilt and malevolence, delayed only by narrative trickery.

Gone Girl is a women's film to make nearly all other women's films look like candyfloss. Gillian (hard G, please) Flynn, who scripted the film herself, has a pretty amazing statement of intent on her website, titled and commencing *I Was Not a Nice Little Girl*, its second sentence being: "My favorite summertime hobby was starring ants and feeding them to spiders."

That's why she wants to write about the violence of women, she says.

"Female violence is a specific brand of ferocity. It's invasive... And the mental violence is positively gory. Women entwine..."

"Isn't it time to acknowledge the ugly side? I've grown quite weary of the spunky heroines, brave rape victims, soul-searching fashionistas that stock so many books. I particularly mourn the lack of female villains... I'm talking violent, wicked women. Scary women."

So that's what she has given us and the popularity of the story, especially among women, despite its radical political incorrectness (false rape claims, anyone, just for starters?) is a phenomenon in itself, suggesting that perhaps women do recognise and in some way relish seeing the hard and ugly side of their sex, if not necessarily acknowledging it in themselves? I wouldn't know. We men just shake our heads, lower our eyes. We're simpletons!

Pike's role as a chameleon, giving people what they want, is much harder to pull off than Affleck's clunkier part and she just about manages it, even though she's not naturally the villainous type – it's enlightening to know

that Fincher decided to cast her after learning she was an only child and thus, he thought, "on her own plane of existence".

It's equally illuminating to learn that Flynn based her story on the real-life case of Scott Peterson, convicted in 2004 of murdering his wife and currently on death row in San Quentin – "who looks more like Scott Peterson than Ben Affleck," Fincher rejoices. And he's right, Wiki shows. Knowing that was her source only makes Flynn's way with reversals seem all the more telling, although keeping them going for the film may have defeated her. It was widely reported that the film's ending had been dramatically altered – all I can say is that the third act remains as unconvincing as ever.

Fincher and his cinematographer, Jeff Cronenweth, have, by the way, made this a much more irritating film to watch than it needed to be. The lighting is ridiculously dark throughout – you start longing for any glimpse of daylight – and the sound is often equally fuzzy, both obvious anxiety-raising devices. Moreover, in almost every single shot the camera lurks below waist height, another mannered way of preventing you getting a clear view of what is going on. A very little of this would have worked just as well. But that's men for you. Literalists.