

I Am Not a Serial Killer

Ireland/United Kingdom/USA 2016

Director: Billy O'Brien

Certificate 15 103m 10s

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

You know you're dealing with an unusual sort of protagonist when his mum won't let him work in the family funeral parlour because he's too obsessed with true-crime carnage already, and she fears it would unbalance the teenager's precarious mental state. The title of this adaptation of the first in a series of young-adult novels by Dan Wells sounds gimmicky but is actually to be taken seriously.

Protestations of innocence notwithstanding, Max Records's central character, John Wayne Cleaver, actually does tick quite a few worrying sociopathic boxes: he finds forming or even understanding emotional connections something of a puzzle, and has to learn to suppress his latent aggressive tendencies. Records, who starred in Spike Jonze's *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009), has an unusual screen presence and proves perfect in the role, for although he looks permanently startled, as if struggling to process what's going on, that wide-eyed expression leaves us wondering about the state of his connection with the world. Records manages all of this with such a precise degree of expressive calibration that, as events unfold, he makes even the tiniest moments of emotional resonance tell. Nominally, this is a horror movie, yet its underlying trajectory traces the psychologically malformed central character's ability to understand and perhaps even feel love – adopting the classic genre device of placing the monster at the emotional heart of the story. Not to give too much away, but here it's the real killer, displaying both a psychotic and a caring side, who's a key influence on the protagonist's tentative maturation towards a more connected sense of self.

This journey starts, perhaps with playful irony, in John's ongoing fascination with the methods of various notorious serial killers – background knowledge that gives him an advantage over the bumbling local cops when sundry bizarre, even animalistic slayings cause terror on the streets of his sleepy Minnesota community and bring a stream of intriguingly ravaged cadavers to his family's mortuary. While the identity of the perpetrator is fairly easily uncovered, Irish screenwriter and director Billy O'Brien's film has myriad other interesting aspects, not least that the teenage sleuth's pursuit follows a morally ambiguous path, pointing up shades of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) as the escalating discoveries possibly chime with his own lurking inner urges. Indeed, having begun to surmise the shocking secret behind the removal of human organs and the mysterious tarry substance deposited by the corpses, John continues surveillance out of his own morbid curiosity, choosing not to get the authorities involved, even though it means extending the trail of victims. His plan to menace the killer's loved one, as an underhand means of letting the latter know he's on to him, results in a truly uncomfortable sequence, since it has us powerlessly observing the troubled protagonist teetering dangerously on the brink, almost letting his own violent potential spiral out of control.

Part of what makes this moment so unsettling is the sense of violation of a dowdy, chintzy, dimly



The killer inside me: Max Records as John Wayne Cleaver, with Laura Fraser as his mother April

lit suburban bedroom – O'Brien's vivid rendering of place is a strength throughout the film. His 2005 debut feature *Isolation* showed a masterly hand at clammy atmospherics, getting the absolute most out of a slurry-sloshed Irish farm setting in which a failed biological experiment unleashed creature-feature consequences. In the new film – again working with ace cameraman Robbie Ryan, whose star has been in the ascendant in the meantime – there's a claggy, damp-infused bleakness to the overall fresco of wintry Minnesota backstreets, engulfing gloomy nights and the icky interior palette at the funeral parlour.

The use of 16mm stock brings a vintage feel to the abiding unease, underlining a

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thematic and visual kinship with, say, George A. Romero's anxiety-racked youthful vampire chronicle *Martin* (1979), yet also, in its pervasive gloom and queasy colour choices, recalling the unlovely world of Krzysztof Kieslowski's Polish period. The impact is further intensified because it's powered along by the keyboard patterns of Adrian Johnston's tremendous score, whose dominating church organ – tied into the story because the instrument provides accompaniment in the family's funeral services – brings to mind both the hypnotic repetitions of early John Carpenter and the labyrinthine baroquery of *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).

Such reference points, though surely among the film's grown-up pleasures for those attuned to them, might seem rather distant from the context of popular YA fiction that spawned the material in the first place. For many potential viewers, small-screen signposts such as *Dexter* (2006-13) or *Six Feet Under* (2001-05) might be more realistic and helpful, yet there's no sense in which O'Brien's deliberate and refined handling, framed by a seemingly rather European sensibility, is



Neighbourhood watch: Christopher Lloyd as Mr Crowley



Pierrot le fou: Records's Cleaver finds forming or even understanding emotional connections a puzzle, and has to learn to repress his aggressive tendencies

misplaced. It's not as if he's somehow come in and put an artsy veneer on populist fare, not least because author Wells is in no mind at all to talk down to his young readers. Instead, John's trials in bonding with his family and sustaining friendships, all the while fretting that he himself is the worst kind of psychological freak, stands throughout as an intelligent and justifiable heightening of universal adolescent concerns. What's more, Wells also finds a graceful entry point to the heart of the issue by having the story's sometimes kindly, sometimes creepy elderly neighbour quote William Blake's poem 'The Tyger'. Christopher Lloyd's character does in turn have his own particular motives in posing the question, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" But it's also a question that resonates with Records's nervy young lad, as he too ponders his own "fearful symmetry". Perhaps he's not so alone in pursuing this line of thought after all...

Throughout all this there's a seriousness to O'Brien's film which is heartening simply because it implores us to take master Cleaver's plight seriously, delivering an unusual and involving character study, with horror and whodunnit elements. It's certainly not as graphic or upfront as a film with 'Serial Killer' in the title might lead one to expect, but for much of the running time the visuals' chilly and pensive cast helps to sustain an immersive intrigue. There is, though, a third-act reveal that will probably prove contentious with those unaware of the original novel, since it seems to break with the story's dark psychological veracity and move into a more fantastical register. For the first time the execution slightly falters, since this new layer of invention doubtless necessitated a more generous effects budget than O'Brien's Irish-UK production could muster, leaving

us with a climactic standoff that's somewhat underpowered following such a strong build-up.

However, this final act is undeniably thematically coherent with what's gone before, emphasising that it's not the superficial action highlights but the underlying emotional through-line that's the real clincher here – allowing us a surprising degree of empathy and insight into the mind of a potential sociopath wanting to understand and maybe even experience love like the rest of us. It also sets a platform for remarkable

performances from Records and Lloyd – the latter given his best role in years as the neighbour, a telling and contradictory portrait of old age that's so much more valuable than the raving comic loon Lloyd has too often been asked to play in the past. Meanwhile O'Brien's admirably controlled direction works up a rising sense of dread from the power of its restraint – managing for as long as possible to keep its horrors tantalisingly in long shot. In sum, a truly superior genre offering from a filmmaker of genuine class and ambition. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Nick Ryan
James Harris
Mark Lane

Written by

Billy O'Brien
Christopher Hyde

Adapted from the book by Dan Wells

Director of Photography

Robbie Ryan

Editor

Nick Emerson

Production Designer

Jennifer Klide

Music

Adrian Johnston

Sound Designer

Aza Hand

Costume Designer

Deborah Fiscus

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Limited and The

Tea Shop and Film

Company Limited

Production Companies

Bord Scannán na

hÉireann/The Irish

Film Board presents

in association with
Quickfire Films, The
Fyzz Facility Limited,
Fantastic Films and
Winterland Pictures
a Floodland Pictures
& The Tea Shop
& Film Company
production
Developed with the
assistance of Screen
Projex, Bord Scannán
na hÉireann/The
Irish Film Board
Executive Producers
Wayne Marc Godfrey

Robert Jones
James Atherton
Jan Pace
Rory Gilmartin
Afolabi Kuti
John McDonnell
Billy O'Brien
Avril Daly
Ruairi Robinson
Robbie Ryan
Bertrand Faivre
Ruth Kenley-Letts

Cast
Max Records

John Wayne Cleaver
Laura Fraser
April Cleaver
Christina Baldwin
Aunt Margaret
Karl Geary
Dr Neblin
Dee Noah
Kay Crowley
Anna Sundberg
Lauren Bacall Cleaver
Raymond Brandstrom
Max
Lucile Lawton
Brooke Watson

Christopher Lloyd
Mr Crowley

In Colour

[1.77:1]

Distributor
Bulldog Film
Distribution

Small-town Minnesota, present day. John Wayne Cleaver is a teenager with sociopathic tendencies who struggles to form emotional attachments and restrain his aggression. His mother runs a funeral parlour but is loath to have him join the family firm, since he's already worryingly obsessed with true-crime stories. These interests have a practical application, however, when a series of mysterious slayings befall the town, and John realises the killer's penchant for removing organs represents a pattern – though he is puzzled by the deposits of tar-like substance left by the corpses.

John is seeing a sympathetic therapist, Dr Neblin, who helps him manage his condition, while assessing his latent potential to become a serial killer. John tracks

his elderly neighbour Mr Crowley and discovers that the latter is the killer, and that in fact he may not be human. Instead of telling the police, a fascinated John continues his surveillance; Dr Neblin is the next victim.

John signals to Crowley that he's on his case by menacing Crowley's beloved wife while the old man is out seeking prey; he learns that Crowley is a monster who feeds on human flesh in order to remain with his spouse. Crowley, now deteriorating physically through age, pursues John to the chapel during a funeral and corners John's mother in the basement embalming room. Mother and son see Crowley's full unearthly form, then together replace his bloodstream with embalming fluid, destroying him.