



WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE

WORDS | Thommy Hutson

"WHEN THE STORY DIES THE EVIL IS SET FREE."

Those haunting, revelatory words are spoken by writer and director Wes Craven—playing, well, writer and director Wes Craven—in his self-referential and half-eponymous 1994 film. The phrase echoed in my head when I first heard it and would ultimately become something of a rallying cry for me after the credits rolled.

Like most kids, I loved movies. All kinds. Well, almost all kinds. The not-so-secret I have mentioned to some—now you—is that I didn't watch horror films at a young age. Instead, they were forced on my I-think-I'm-ready-oh-God-I'm-not-ready little boy eyeballs. It started with my grandmother forcing me to watch *Salem's Lot*. Maybe watch is an understatement. I was in the room, eyes covered, heart racing at every scream and screech and music sting. It continued with my brother sneaking me in to see *An American Werewolf in London*. (God, what was I thinking?)

But it wasn't until Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* that I saw the true terror of the movies. I was never the same since and knew, at that moment, I would be a filmmaker.

The problem was there weren't many (read: zilch) opportunities to learn, do, and be a filmmaker in small town upstate New York. So, I did what every enterprising, budding cineaste does: I saved over a thousand dollars, bought a VHS camcorder, and made my own movies. Those gems still exist somewhere. I pray they remain unfound.

Craven's original creation, a grave, horrifying, in-the-shadows evil (the spectre of Krueger is only in the film a mere eight minutes), went on throughout five sequels to become a part of the mainstream; a slick, wise-cracking, MTV anti-hero that had his burnt visage on everything—it would seem—but cereal boxes. This was Hollywood, after all. And in Hollywood, the voice of the box office is louder and more convincing than anything in even the best screenplay.



As time went on, and the films became more and more fantastic, audiences waited less for the kill than for the wisecracks Krueger would use. This version was not the character Craven had dreamt up. And, honestly, it was not the Krueger who stuck in my little boy mind, forcing me to confront my fears while simultaneously setting me on a quest to fulfill my dreams. I was going to make movies. I was going to meet Wes Craven.

Fast forward. Picture it: Hollywood, 1994.

It's been said Tinseltown is a place where nobody knows anything. I'm not here to argue that point, but I feel confident in saying that Wes Craven did know his audience. He understood what made them tick, often winding them up so tightly they (we) became desperate to explode in, pardon the pun, nightmares and screams.

And the time had apparently come for Craven to right the wrongs done to his *Nightmare* creation. To bring his Krueger back from the dead, if you will. As planned as that aspect was on the part of him and Bob Shaye, it was absolute luck that I even saw the film when it came out.

I'm glad I did because it changed my life.

I had only recently arrived in Los Angeles to attend UCLA. I didn't have a car, a job, or family nearby. I travelled thousands of miles across the country with just two suitcases of essentials: clothes, toiletries, books, and some *Fangoria* magazines. Tucked away in one of those beloved issues (#97, with Tom Savini's *Night of the Living Dead* remake on the cover, if memory serves) was a return plane ticket home. Just in case.

One day after a particularly early accounting class, I was on a bus I didn't normally take, on an unusual route, contemplating doing that just-in-case thing: using the airline ticket home, this time to stay. I realized I needed to figure out where I was and where I was going.

Literally.

I stepped off the bus and looked up into blinding sunlight. I was in front of a movie theater, the now long-gone Hollywood Galaxy General Cinema on Hollywood Boulevard. It loomed over me as I readied to contemplate crushing my dreams. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I noticed something on the marquee that confused and invigorated me. Four words, one title—

WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE.

Now, this was before the internet became a big thing. I was far from being one of the 1 in 10 Americans online. I didn't have a television. No newspaper subscription. And, in the interest of full disclosure, I had not bought or read a *Fango* since my move. (I know, I know...)

The bottom line was this: I had no real idea what this *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* was. But I knew I had to see it.

I moved into the theater lobby and powerwalked to the poster.

That brow. Those eyes. It's—is that—Freddy?

Oh, dear Jesus, Heather Langenkamp is in this?

And Robert. Englund!?

This is a freaking *Elm Street* movie!

In my mind, I ran around the theater screaming and waving my hands as if I were a teen girl at a Backstreet Boys concert. This unknown-to-me



Nightmare on Elm Street, written and directed by Wes Craven and starring Heather Langenkamp and Robert Englund, may not have been a burning bush, but this was prophetic significance.



I bought my ticket, grabbed a box of Raisinets, buttered my popcorn, and sat in the auditorium. In my giddy excitement, where I suddenly felt like the kid waiting for the original *Nightmare* to start a decade ago, it barely registered I was the only one in the theater. This screening, this message, this herald, was meant for me and only me.

I'm not here to recount the plot of the seventh *Elm Street* film. (Though I will argue it is the best of the sequels by far). What I will say, however, is that it is scary, fascinating, ironic, moving, and powerful. From Heather Langenkamp playing "Heather Langenkamp" to Wes Craven offering a plausible reason for the horrors inside the movie and, by extension, our world, Wes Craven's *New Nightmare* constructs a beautiful sort of cognitive dissonance—a horror movie about the effect of horror movies on people who make and watch horror movies.

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Oh, and then there's Freddy. But this is not Jokey Krueger. It isn't even the dream killer from the 1984 classic. It's a distillation as much as it is an augmentation of the dark forces that swirled within that entity Craven brought to life. A new and intoxicating black magic elixir of evil forces that can all too quickly get out of control. New makeup, new outfit, new glove. A fifth razor claw on the thumb. All the better to slash at you, my dear.

It worked for me in more ways than I can count. I also understand that, for many, it did not. Some feel the film is too cerebral for its own good. (To that, I say, Thank you, Wes.) Some complain Freddy is barely in it. (Like the original, his minimal screen time is punctuation.) The makeup is weird, the costume is different, the actors are playing themselves, talking about their past, where is Nancy, and on and on and on. I've heard them all and have had plenty of healthy debates with its detractors. Looking back, I now know the fact that I was the only one in the theater was a sign less of my wants and desires and more of the power of a less-than-stellar box office.



Wes was always able to find a way to say something in an interesting and innovative way.

Craven, though, was a very smart man. And *New Nightmare* is a very smart movie. Like most Wes Craven movies, what made the film work on a deeper level for me was that the more I watched (and I watched it a lot), the more I started to see myself and the trials I had to go through. I didn't need to dry swallow sleeping pills to save my child, but I did need to wake up. I wasn't running for my life on a freeway, but I almost decided to run away from my goals. I needed to figure out and defeat my demons of self-doubt and find a way not to let them get the better of me.

It proved that Craven's films weren't simply scary movies. They were much, much more. Truthful, compelling, and, when they worked, prescient. *New Nightmare* is no exception, as we would all see just two years later with a little movie called *Scream*.

Wes always found a way to say something interesting and innovative. Love, hate, or indifference aside, *New Nightmare* is no different. As a horror and country music fan, I like to say that Wes Craven was meta when meta wasn't cool.

For me, though, watching those new nightmare images unfold truly was my watershed moment. Like the characters in the film, I had to come to terms with what I thought Freddy was, what he became, and what he was going forward. But also how to understand and, eventually, conquer it. The thing. The unexplained voice of darkness and doubt that lurks within us all, reaching up from the depths to drag us down, down, down. It forced me to think of my trajectory into adulthood—what I wanted, what I set out to do, and how I would make that happen. It began to feel as heady

as the film, but that was something I loved about it. It made me think about more than what was unravelling on the reels of celluloid. This wasn't just a movie about Freddy or Heather or Wes. This was, as Heather reads from the script she finds, "her life." Mine, too. The tagline, "This time the terror doesn't stop at the screen," suddenly seemed to mean a lot more.

This Time The Terror Doesn't Stop At The Screen.

Of course, movies can be and mean many things, but *New Nightmare* found its way deep into the psyche of viewers and had them (me) asking a question way beyond the norm of, "Was it scary?" or "How did it make you feel?" No, this film by the master of horror Wes Craven had me (all of us) asking a very different, though no less fascinating, question: could a movie ever truly be dangerous?

It's an important question from a writer and director known throughout his career to ask the important questions. He just couched them in scares. He knew how to get us where we lived. We couldn't hide from Freddy if he were always in the back of our minds. And everyone has a Freddy. Mine was whether to stay or go.

Because I happened upon a film I didn't know existed, from a writer and director whom I admired, I stayed in Hollywood. If Wes Craven could reinvent his creation, I could undoubtedly reinvent my thinking. It might not have been easy, but neither was Heather fighting Freddy in a hellish netherworld. And, hey, that turned out pretty okay. No matter what came at me, I was ready to put up one hell of a fight. I would answer the call to play my own Nancy one last time.



The film had an incredible, tangible impact on my life professionally, personally, and creatively. Wes Craven and his *New Nightmare* inspired me in 1994 and continue to do so today. It set my life off in a new direction: writer, producer, director, and creator. I met Wes Craven. My path intersected with more than a few *Elm Street* cast and crew. Without a doubt, my life and career are better for it.

Like its creator, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* was intelligent, fresh, daring, and had something important to say. I am glad I listened. I would not, could not, let my story die. Because I saw the film, I followed my dreams.

To have done anything less would have been, you guessed it, a nightmare.

