



Jessie in Chains

By Christina Harlin, your Fearless
Young Orphan

Gerald's Game (2018)

Directed by Mike Flanagan

The novel *Gerald's Game* waffles back and forth, being both an unforgettable thriller and a rather dull slog. It's such a great idea and the sort of thing that King is quite good at: the person trapped in an extremely small space and forced to cope with considerable danger while he or she is virtually helpless (*Cujo* comes to mind, along with scenes of bondage in other novels like *Salem's Lot* or *The Stand*). In this case, we have poor Jessie (Carla Gugino), who has been handcuffed to a bed by her amorous husband Gerald (Bruce Greenwood).

The movie follows the book's main thread closely – as simple as this thread is, it would be rather difficult to veer off. Jessie and Gerald go to spend a week alone at their secluded lake house. Their marriage has been rocky lately and they have (well, *he* has) the hope that a little bit of kink will put the life back into their relationship. Jessie is uncertain from the start but it isn't until the actual cuffs are on and Gerald gets rough



Kids, always remember to establish a safe-word. BEFORE.

and calls himself “daddy” that Jessie decides this is definitely not for her. Too bad they didn’t establish a safe-word ahead of time. Would it have made a difference? Despite his wife’s discomfort, Gerald hesitates far too long, making us wonder about how nice a man this actually is. He jokes that he might not unlock her

after all. He looks like he’s considering going through with a rape fantasy, making it into a rape reality. Then he does something else, far less serious but annoying anyway: he sulks. He pouts. He blames Jessie for things being crappy between them. And then – oopsie – he has a heart attack and collapses to the floor, instantly dead.

There lies Jessie, seriously cuffed to a seriously sturdy bed. The key to the handcuffs and her cell phone are out of reach. They are miles from anyone else. It will be days before anyone checks on them. During this mild afternoon, Gerald left the front door wide open, so that just anything could wander inside. Soon Jessie is visited by a stray dog she fed earlier that day – he is, as she jokingly notes, not a rescue dog. Consider that a starving stray doesn’t have much in the way of manners and a dead body on the floor counts as food. Jessie is horrified to see that her husband is about to be nibbled on – hey, I say let the dog eat the jackass. Whatever’s eating Gerald isn’t nearly as serious as what’s going on with you, girlfriend. And because this is Stephen King, Jessie may have another visitor coming and going: a huge, disfigured man seems to be creeping in and out of the house at night – or maybe he’s a hallucination? She’s having plenty of those. He neither helps nor harms her, simply watches, but Jessie has a strong impression that if this guy is real, his watching-time will be limited and she doesn’t care to know what he’ll try after that.

Often with a Stephen King adaptation, I'll come aboard bitching that a two-hour movie has "rushed" a great King novel, or the opposite, that a six-hour TV miniseries has blown a story out of all proportion only to capitalize on advertising dollars. This time, I'll split the difference and say that *Gerald's Game*, the book, was too long by half, and that this Netflix Original film of same actually does us a favor by keeping it brief. Jessie's actions are limited in such a severe way that most of the book must take place inside her thought processes: how to survive, how to get help, how to escape.

The movie is staged in a potentially annoying way, with "visions" of Gerald and Jessie herself walking about the room and talking to our heroine, goading, berating and/or coaching her. It's one of my least favorite film tropes. I always see it as a cheap way to make "talking to oneself" seem more dynamic but I can't remember it working often. I did have a moment of disappointment when I saw that *Gerald's Game* was going to use this technique. However, in this case, I was pleasantly surprised. That's primarily because Greenwood and Gugino do some terrific acting. At one point, when Gerald is telling Jessie that her situation is too dire to fight, Greenwood's soft monologue is downright chilling. The rest of the time, the film refrains from making him a too-obvious villain. And Carla Gugino keeps Jessie likeable and utterly sympathetic, acknowledging her own ordeal while refusing at any point to wallow in her bad memories or in misery. She's so good



SAFE-WORD! SAY THE SAFE-WORD NOW!

that I confess for a very brief second I forgot that she played both roles – I was trying to remember who played the “imaginary” Jessie to Gugino’s trapped one. That’s how noticeably different the characters are – the tough inner Jessie who sees clearly, and the one who’s stuck in handcuffs.

In the novel, Jessie takes an internal odyssey of self-discovery, coming to terms with some distasteful shit in her childhood that possibly made her choices in men less-than-reliable. While on her journey, she not only crosses paths with Dolores Claiborne (who is busily murdering her husband in another novel) but brings to mind people she knows from her support group and a bunch of other stuff. This may be the most purposefully feminist novel of King’s I’ve ever read, and while I appreciate his sensitivity (that’s not sarcasm), he was actually always good at creating female characters resilient and interesting enough that he didn’t owe us any overt manifesto. I might not be so flip about that, if the “feminist” half of the novel were a little more interesting, but it’s dull to traipse around in Jessie’s mental unhappiness when it’s her physical safety that we’re more concerned with at the moment.

Netflix’s film sidesteps a lot of the tedium by giving us Jessie’s story fast and without mercy. It shows us a clear picture of the real betrayal: it was bad enough to be molested, but in the long-term, it was far worse to be manipulated into blaming herself for it. Does Jessie really need to come to terms with her secret past in order to escape? Well, yes and no. In her situation, what else does she have to do but remember all her old nightmares? Luckily a couple of them have handy solutions in mind for her new one. Just remember, escape is not as simple as unlocking a pair of handcuffs.