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film reviews

"Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2

By Matt Mosley
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I think *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* will be the most misunderstood film of the year. This sequel to the brilliant 1999 film *The Blair Witch Project* (also highly misunderstood and under appreciated) is a tricky little farce that may have audiences screaming, "I want my money back." Like the original, *Book of Shadows* plays with the format of cinematic storytelling and, in its own way, is just as fresh.

At least for a while, *Book of Shadows* focuses on the cult hysteria that followed the release of *The Blair Witch Project*. Jeffrey Donovan, a member of the new cast of characters, runs a tourist business called "The Blair Witch Hunt." His inaugural tour takes four misguided souls into the woods; the same woods that the ill-fated documentarians from the original film so naively pranced through. This time, the curious kids make it out alive, but only after their campground is ransacked and their bodies marked with mysterious symbols. The rest of the film plays like a puzzle as Jeff and his clients try to find out what happened on that strange night in the woods years ago.

People are really going to miss the point of *Book of Shadows*. Like the original, the opening message contains the format for what you are about to see. The first film used mock documentary and home video as its way to tell the story; *Book of Shadows* uses mock re-enactment. In *The Blair Witch Project*, you never forget that you are watching home movies; the in-your-face, non-narrative style is too strong. *Book of Shadows*,

though, is a narrative film, and it is easy to slip into that straight-story-mode while watching it. About 30 minutes into the film, I had to remind myself that this wasn't a real movie, it was a re-enactment, like on TV. Because the film works on a more subtle level, the opening message gets lost and you forget what you are really watching.

The re-enactment style plays off shows like *Unsolved Mysteries* and *America's Most Wanted* in which viewers watch an interpretation of real events. Anyone who has ever watched one of these shows knows that the re-enactments are very poorly done and can be quite cheesy. *Book of Shadows* plays off that cheesy TV format. The actors in *Book of Shadows* are not unlike the ones in *Unsolved Mysteries*: they read bad dialogue in bad lighting and are completely forgettable. If *Book of Shadows* is viewed as a re-enactment, then it works, but if it is taken as a serious narrative, you'll probably want to walk out about half way through.

Director Joe Berlinger has made an interesting sequel to a film that was almost impossible to follow-up. It is quite a departure for him. His previous films were documentaries. Berlinger, and his usual co-director, Bruce Sinofsky, made one of the best films I have ever seen, *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills*, which seemed to influence *Book of Shadows* in many ways.

Even if viewed the way it is intended, *Book of Shadows* may disappoint you. The scare from *The Blair Witch Project* is lost in the format. I wouldn't exactly recommend the film; the story isn't great, but it is sort of clever.



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