





# BURNT OFFERINGS

## CAST

**OLIVER REED** as Ben Rolf  
**KAREN BLACK** as Marian Rolf  
**BURGESS MEREDITH** as Arnold Allardyce  
**EILEEN HECKART** as Roz Allardyce  
**LEE H. MONTGOMERY** as David Rolf  
**DUB TAYLOR** as Walker  
**BETTE DAVIS** as Aunt Elizabeth  
**ANTHONY JAMES** as the Chaffeur

## CREW

Produced and Directed by **DAN CURTIS**  
Associate Producer **ROBERT SINGER**  
Screenplay by **WILLIAM F. NOLAN** and **DAN CURTIS**  
Based on the Novel by **ROBERT MARASCO**  
Director of Photography **JACQUES MARQUETTE**  
Additional Photography by **STEVAN LARNER**  
Editor **DENNIS VIRKLER**  
Production Designer **EUGENE LOURIE**  
Music by **ROBERT COBERT**



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## BURNT OFFERINGS: WORSHIPPING AT THE TEMPLE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

by Kat Ellinger

When it comes to Gothic, location is everything. The first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, set down a gauntlet that ensured that forever, within the genre, setting would take just as much prominence as the main protagonist, acting on some level as a character in its own right. As the genre developed, so did this central line, and the sweeping dark romances of writers like Ann Radcliffe and later Charlotte Brontë, cemented this core idea into the imagination of their readers: the home isn't always the safe haven we wish it to be and bad things can happen to you within your own bedchamber, as you hide under the covers at night, praying for salvation. So it was that the Gothic oeuvre became densely populated with creepy old castles, locked rooms, twisting staircases, and cobwebbed crypts. It is a motif we see crop up in the horror film time and time again, so much so that it has become considered kitsch and comfortable to our modern, sophisticated palettes.

As writers and filmmakers are continuously attracted to the genre, the challenge is to try and refresh these ideas, to defy audience or reader expectations – a difficult task given the strict set of codes and tropes associated with Gothic. Despite the difficulties, this is something writer Robert Marasco achieved with his 1973 novel *Burnt Offerings*, as he mined the vein of the American Dream as a basis for his own take on Gothic, producing a desolate canvass on which a typical family is destroyed by one woman's lust to acquire the illusion of wealth and magazine living, even if it is just for a summer. The novel then became the setting for Dan Curtis' 1976 cinematic adaptation, the film retaining the original title of its literary counterpart. Over the years, but especially at the time, the film received mixed reviews, with criticism focusing on the brooding pace and overly familiar "haunted house" setting. Despite this, it won a number of awards and has consistently continued to attract many fans in cult circles over the years. The film featured an all-star cast, including Oliver Reed, Bette Davis and Karen Black, with a reasonable budget (approx. \$1.5 million), which ensured strong performances all around, and suitably lush and decadent visuals.

*Burnt Offerings* concerns Ben (Oliver Reed) and Marian Rolfe (Karen Black), who, along with their son David (Lee H. Montgomery) and aunt Elizabeth (Bette Davis), are offered an opportunity that seems too good to be true: the rental of a sweeping colonial mansion



(complete with pool and ornate fountains) for an entire summer, for just \$900. The Allardyces, who own the residence – Roz (Eileen Heckart) and her wheelchair-bound brother Arnold (Burgess Meredith) – have just two conditions. Firstly, and this offer is only available to the “right kind of people”, the tenants must love the house as much as they do. The house could do with some serious TLC – most of the grounds and interior have fallen into disrepair – so one has to wonder how much “love” this involves. The other small but significant caveat is that the Allardyces’ ancient old mother must remain in the house. The Rolfes are assured they will not see the woman: she lives away in her own annex at the top of the house, tending to her large collection of photographs. However, Marian is informed she must attend to Mrs. Allardyce by providing meals for her three times a day, which are to be left on a tray outside of her room at set times. Although Ben is unconvinced, suspicious of the Allardyces’ true motives, his wife knows she has come home the minute she enters the estate.

Marasco’s book establishes the context for the story in a preamble, where we see Marian as a woman plagued by her never-ending quest for domestic bliss and the acquisition of wealth that her lower middle class status cannot afford. The family are stuck in a cramped apartment in Queens as summer is looming, and despite this the housewife dedicates her days to scrubbing and polishing, flicking through *Homes and Gardens* magazines, and gloating over the antique furniture she has managed to save up for. Appearance is everything to Marion Rolfe, and throughout the novel we see highlighted in the text how she fetishizes material possessions, eventually giving them far more significance than the lives of her family, as the Allardyce house consumes and destroys them in order to regenerate itself via a malignant force. In essence the film is a twisted reworking of *Hansel and Gretel*, with the Rolfes led to the house made of “sweets”, or in this case mouth-wateringly expensive *objets d’art*, by an (unseen) evil witch.

Curtis, on the other hand, gets stuck right into the action. We meet the Rolfes when they arrive at the mansion, as the film hits the ground running and the family is quickly installed, with Marion possessed by the force lurking within the estate fairly early on. Regardless of this, the director still manages to retain the subtext and the screenplay written by Curtis and William F. Nolan is fairly faithful to Marasco’s original, that is if you discount Curtis’ showstopper of an ending, which varies wildly and in the most wonderful of ways from Marasco’s parting shot. Nolan collaborated with Curtis on a number of scripts which included *The Norliss Tapes* (1973), *Turn of the Screw* (1974), and *Trilogy of Terror* (1975), and as a writing team they appeared to work well together. Curtis said of his vision for the adaptation, in Jeff Thompson’s book focusing on his career:





My whole theory of what is scary and what isn't scary went out of the window with this movie because I always believed the premise of a "house that eats people" was so bullshit that it would be like eating Chinese food. In ten minutes, it would be over. But somehow, the inherent terror, the deep-seated, deep-down, psychological fear that ran through this picture, came from this "house restoring itself" premise. And then, the ending really took care of it completely.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, not everyone was on board with Curtis' idea of "terror" as he was. Robert Ebert said of the film in his review at the time (October 8, 1976):

But then again, it's a tricky business, making a supernatural thriller with artistic ambitions. Roman Polanski and William Friedkin have pulled it off in recent years, with subtle blends of the mundane and the preternatural. And, come to think of it, *The Legend of Hell House* brought out the fun in this sort of material very well. But *Burnt Offerings* just persists, until it occurs to us that the characters are the only ones in the theater who don't know what's going to happen next.<sup>2</sup>

Some might argue that the critic's comments missed the point, because to compare *Burnt Offerings* to the work of Polanski and Friedkin is almost as futile as comparing chalk and cheese. Marasco's setting doesn't ever make any illusion that it sets out to reinvent the genre like the aforementioned films (and texts) did. Dan Curtis' cinematic rendering even less so, instead revelling in the idea of the Gothic on a purely celebratory level, making no pretensions to be anything else. What Marasco and then Curtis do is far more subtle, playing, in true Gothic tradition, on the hopes, fears and social climate of the time, picking at the idealisation of the perfect family home, demonstrating that the old adage "be careful what you wish for" is still applicable to 70s society, even with its emphasis on materialism and social status. On this note, regardless of the opinion of Ebert and others like him, *Burnt Offerings* lends itself to some very interesting deeper readings indeed. In many ways it is an example of true Gothic, and certainly American Gothic, and it is a story that, despite surface appearances, does indeed inject something different into a well-trodden formula. As Dale Bailey states in *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in Popular American Fiction*:

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1 - Thompson, Jeff (2012) *The Television Horrors of Dan Curtis*, p. 155.

2 - <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/burnt-offerings-1976>

The “significance” here is obvious in the manner of much popular fiction but it is also surprisingly subversive. The book is nothing less than an attack on the American dream, the ideology of accumulation and consumption that structures so many American lives. Marian Rolfe sacrifices her husband and child, and ultimately her very self, on the altar of America, only to find that the dream is hollow.<sup>3</sup>

But then Gothic was all about home, about familial relationships, particularly decay and transgression within this setting. The earliest writers were expressing fears about their current climate, and relationships, as Europe changed considerably throughout the industrial revolution. For female writers such as Radcliffe and Brontë, this was also a way for women to explore the newly establishing industrialised order that placed domesticity at the heart of the modern home, especially when it came to strict division between the sexes that encouraged good men to act as breadwinner and good wives to play house. Curtis used the splendid neoclassical building Dunsmuir House (Oakland, California), familiar to many from when it later appeared in *Phantasm* (1979), to suggest links to the past, in particular the aristocracy, who are often painted as evil within the realm of Gothic fiction: a theme which helped to establish the notion of a new class system in Europe.

*Burnt Offerings* explores some of these flavours, but in very contemporary ways. We examine the position of Marian Rolfe, a woman driven to play out the façade of the right kind of living. So stressed is she at the appearance of her environment projecting a certain image, she has made the notion of “home” part of her inner psyche. In essence she craves the idea of a life *The Stepford Wives*’ Joanna Eberhart is so horrified by: both films/texts explore the same themes, though from different angles. While we see many instances of Marion tending house, this comes at the price of distancing herself from her family, especially Ben. She completely rejects him, a fact which drives him – as his own psyche begins to deconstruct – to attempt to claim what is “his” in the taking of his wife by force.

The tale also explores the notion of aristocracy as inherently evil. In an American Gothic setting, this is translated to “old money”: the Allardyces, who lure unsuspecting lower classes to their beautiful home, give them a taste of what life could be like if they were born at the right time, in the right place, but then think nothing of harvesting these people to keep their own dream of decadence and affluence alive, forever.

In his book *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King places *Burnt Offerings* alongside his own consuming house tale, *The Shining* (1977), and Anne Rivers Siddons’ novel *The House Next Door* (1978). There are definite similarities in all three tales, most notably the idea of a building as a living force, able to possess the people who reside within it, in order to draw life from their impending deaths. What becomes of note here is that Marasco’s novel predates them both, with the cinematic counterparts in both instances following suit. However, the idea of a house as a malignant force was not entirely new for American Gothic – Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* for example. As Murphy notes in *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*:

In Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the link between family and home is rendered even more significant by his depiction of a family and a house which actually share a single, indissoluble identity. In Poe, as is the case from Walpole to modern gothic, place and space exhibit a malign influence and mobility and are stronger than their human counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

This thinking flowed through the then establishing genre of (specifically) American Gothic, as it evolved to reflect 20th century concerns, with writers such as the highly influential Shirley Jackson exploring “house” settings in her work such as *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). However, once we get to Marasco and *Burnt Offerings*, the genre takes yet another turn, which appears to be in some part indebted to his novel. After the book, a number of these tales emerged, based on the similar structure of a house which is not just able to scare or frighten those who dwell within it with ghosts and hauntings, but which can feed like a vampire from those souls who cross the threshold. As well as King’s *The Shining*, which remains a seminal work in the genre, there was also *The Amityville Horror*, which although it purported to be a “true story”, travelled along the very same lines of a family driven to violence by a force within hidden between its four walls.

Perhaps, on that note, the biggest injustice to *Burnt Offerings* isn’t just those bad reviews lamenting that the film wasn’t original enough, but the fact that it actually was missed by those who, like Marion Rolfe, were so wrapped up in appearances that they failed to see what was lurking beneath the surface, and the potential for influence that existed within.

*Kat Ellinger is a journalist, critic and columnist; currently writing for Scream Magazine, Fangoria, Diabolique Magazine and Shock Till You Drop.*

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3 - Bailey, Dale (1999) *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in Popular American Fiction*, p. 77.

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4 - Murphy, Bernice M (2009) *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, p. 107.





## ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*Burnt Offerings* is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono sound. The HD master was provided by MGM via Hollywood Classics.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**

Executive Producer: **Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer: **James White**

Production Assistant: **Liane Cunje**

QC Manager: **Nora Mehenni**

Subtitling: **IBF**

Blu-ray Mastering: **DCU**

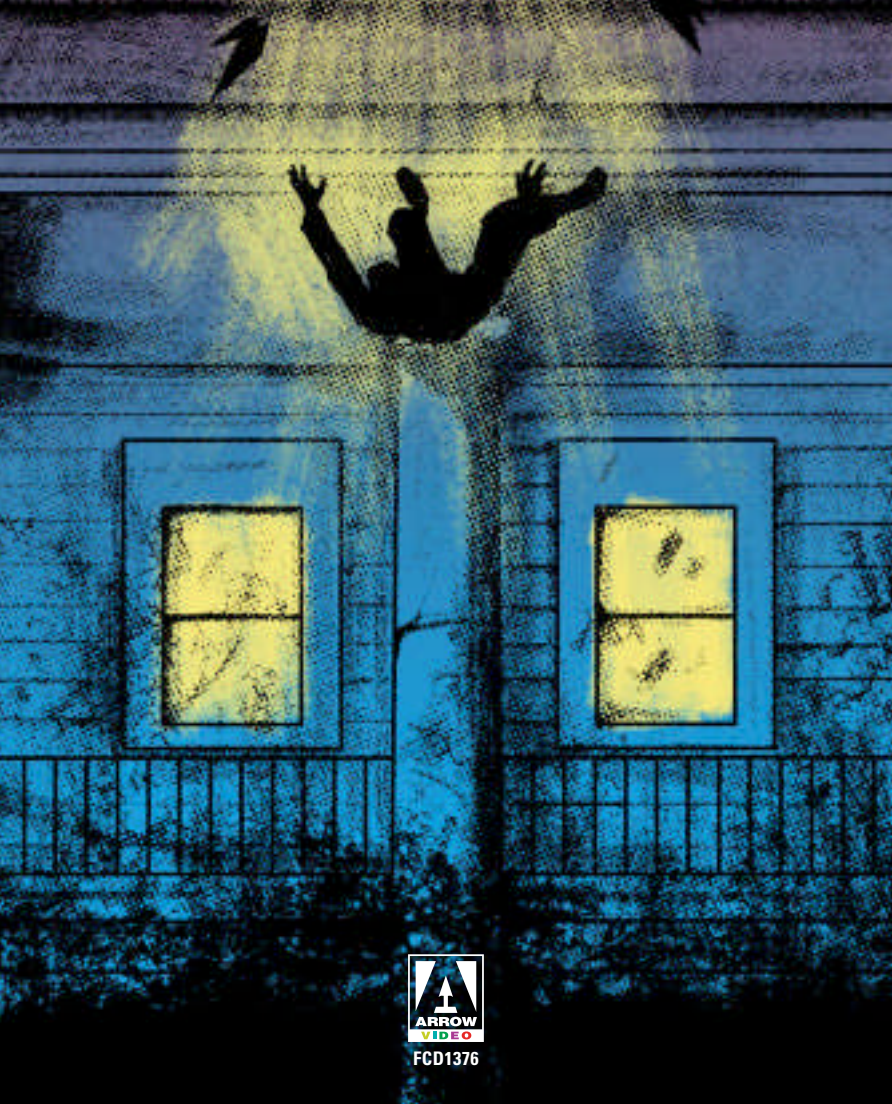
Artist: **Haunt Love**

Design: **Jack Pemberton**

## SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Ewan Cant, Kat Ellinger, Justin Miller





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