

THE ENEMY IS EVERYONE:
PRAISE FOR *ROSEMARY'S BABY*

BY CHUCK PALAHNIUK

Before Ira Levin, horror always happened somewhere else. Regular ordinary people were forced to pack their luggage and kennel their dogs and had to leave their homes and schlep seemingly forever to Transylvania, to Manderlay, to the House of Usher, or Hill House, or the Bates Motel. Always, the journey was justified by a new job, say, as governess at a Henry James country estate, or as participant in a Shirley Jackson field study of parapsychology (oh, the wedding of science and superstition), or it was some wrong-headed Daphne Du Maurier errand to deliver a mated pair of lovebirds. Whatever the reason for the trip, it always ended badly.

Such a long commute just to be terrorized and, most times, slaughtered.

Still, it was a comfort to know that real, life-threatening horror never occurred at home. You had to be baited far, far away. For the century leading up to 1967 the real horrors had been elsewhere in the world, always outside the borders of England and the United States. If you stayed home then you'd be safe, but if you ventured out, looking for trouble – to, say, Northern Ireland or Vietnam – well, you deserved whatever you got. Home constituted this safe little island where women could raise children in domestic bliss.

Yes, everyday life was all well-and-fine until Ira Levin brought the requisite haunted castle into the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Such a stroke of genius: to haul all of the creaking, clanking monster movie cliches into the midst of sophisticated smart-alecky New Yorkers. Monsters in the glaring light of day look hilarious – Minnie Castevet, for example – but they remain monsters. And reading the first two thirds of this book, *Rosemary's Baby*, you don't know whether to laugh or to worry. To admit fear would be to lose face and risk being branded as a superstitious rube. Rosemary Woodhouse is from Omaha, Nebraska; most of the people who read this book will be from places like Omaha or Great Falls or Tacoma or Shreveport, and none of them want to look like idiots, especially not in front of blase city slickers. So, no matter how dire and obvious the danger becomes, no one will acknowledge the true malevolence until it's too late.

It's reported that *Rosemary's Baby* is based on Anton LaVey and his Church of Satan, but in 1967 the entire world was quickly fracturing into covens of one sort or another: the Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Front, the National Republican Army bombers, the Black Panthers, the Manson Family and Playboy Key Clubs, and it seemed that secret cabals had become the norm. Thanks to Levin the House of Usher now stood on Central Park West, and everyone wanted to live there so badly that

they were able to overlook its unresolved history of cannibalism, Satanic worship, suicides and infanticide. No, people were living in the modern era, freed from the silly cautions of the past. Religion didn't count. Religion was a joke, a relic, an embarrassment. Science had trumped God; witness the magazine cover with its glaring headline 'Is God Dead?' in the obstetrician's waiting room. Instead of trusting their priests, modern New Yorkers blindly followed the advice of their doctors, especially Park Avenue doctors who appeared on television and treated wealthy socialites, even when that advice caused unendurable pain and seemed at odds with every other medical authority. Even when those doctors smelled terrible.

But, no, it was 1967 and the entire world had gone insane. The madness had landed itself smack-dab in the middle of our lives, and with this book Ira Levin marked that shift. Before, if you left society you were in danger. Now, if you remained in the consensus of this deranged, corrupt civilization you were in greater peril. In ironic contrast to established gothic precedent, the safest interlude is when Rosemary abandons her city life and escapes to an isolated cabin in the wilderness, eating canned chili and fuming over her husband's erratic behavior. That isolated, lonely place where in past narratives she'd meet her vampire or axe murderer, in Levin's new urban gothic tale it's become a sanctuary.

Before *Rosemary's Baby* nature was the enemy, in the form of ghosts and death and decay. Granted, there had been a couple of early horror novels set in polite society. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but at most the enemy was a single deranged person. Now with Levin's urban horror classic, the enemy was everyone. Levin takes all the tropes of gothic horror – the castle, the maiden, the digs at Catholicism and captivity and torture, the monsters – and he makes them all fresh and plausible, so believable that decades later communities are still whipped into a frenzy over rumors of secret covens and Satanic ritual abuse, and despite the fact that no hard evidence is found dozens of people are regularly tried and sentenced to prison.

And, please, let's not forget politics. In 1967 everything was politics, and that aspect of the novel marked it as ground-breaking and modern. Everything done to Rosemary is a political act, a revolutionary plot meant to overthrow God. This is not the mindless attack of a madman upon a single victim. Predator on prey. This is a plan to bring a powerful leader out of exile and spur a vast shift in world politics.

There are books which document the culture and books that create it, and *Rosemary's Baby* is both. Levin gave readers horror, politics, religion and comedy, all of it set where we live, but he was a tough act to follow. By 1973, Robert Marasco's *Burnt Offerings* once more placed the haunted castle in the deep woods, without neighbours. In 1977, Stephen King's *The Shining* punted the castle even farther, perched in the snowbound Rocky Mountains. Since 1967, no book has touched the classic you now hold in your hands.

