

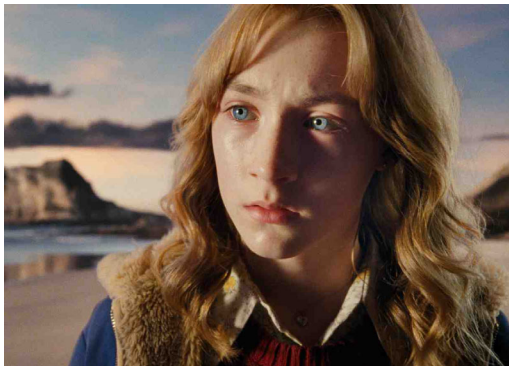
## The Lovely Bones

Directed by Peter Jackson

Screenplay by Philippa Boyens, Fran Walsh, & Peter Jackson

Based on a novel by Alice Sebold

Principal Actors: Saoirse Ronan + Stanley Tucci & Mark Wahlberg



Saoirse Ronan as "Susie Salmon."

**The Lovely Bones** is the story of a teenager named Susie who is brutally murdered by an innocuous-looking neighbor. While Mr. Harvey fastidiously covers his tracks, Susie is trapped in a parallel universe called "the Inbetween" (not yet Heaven but no longer Earth), where she watches as her loved ones struggle to go on living without her.

Although faithfully based on Alice Sebold's best-selling source novel, the film version of **The Lovely Bones** also gives Susie her own storyline—she has a puzzle she must solve on our behalf before she can enter Heaven (wherever or whatever that might be).

With an excellent cast and all the tools of cinema at their command, director Peter Jackson and his team members do an excellent job of finding the core truth in this poignant story, and despite its tragic premise, watching **The Lovely Bones** is an enlivening, enriching and galvanizing experience.

**Pen's Points:** \*\*\*\* $\frac{1}{2}$  $\frac{1}{2}$

*The Lovely Bones* is the story of a teenager named "Susie Salmon" who is lured to a seemingly open (though carefully prepared) location, and then brutally murdered. The perpetrator, "George Harvey," is Susie's neighbor, someone who commits this horrendous act and then continues to live right across the street from her grieving family.

When the police arrive, canvassing the street, Mr. Harvey is respectful and helpful, offering them cookies and blaming himself for not being more observant. ("No, um, no, I don't think I saw anything unusual.") Face-to-face with Susie's devastated father, he offers his condolences, man-to-man. In other words, Mr. Harvey is a monster, but he's so inconspicuous that he embodies nothing less than "the banality of evil."

While Mr. Harvey (Stanley Tucci) fastidiously covers his tracks, Susie (Saoirse Ronan) speaks to us directly from "the Inbetween." Trapped in a parallel universe that's not yet Heaven but also no longer Earth, Susie can only watch as her loved ones struggle to

go on living without her. The Inbetween is a literary device, of course, a way to tell a complex story from multiple points of view. There is no Inbetween, and who knows if there's a Heaven, but the basic facts of the narrative are simple enough: Susie is dead and Mr. Harvey is alive.

In Alice Sebold's best-selling source novel, there are three concurrent threads. While Susie watches Mr. Harvey, she also provides updates on her family members (father Jack, mother Abigail, sister Lindsay, brother Buckley, and grandmother Lynn) as well as her boyfriend (Ray Singh). But in the film version of *The Lovely Bones*, screenwriters Philippa Boyens and Fran Walsh have also given Susie her own storyline. She's no longer just an observer of other people's thoughts and deeds; she has a puzzle she must solve, a work she must do on our behalf. For the sake of those who haven't seen *The Lovely Bones* yet, I'm going to be oblique: let's just say that to leave the Inbetween and get to Heaven (wherever or whatever that might be), Susie must relinquish her "birth family" and come to recognize herself as a member of her "death family."

The Salmons live in a comfortable, upscale suburb just outside Philadelphia (where our nation's founders signed our *Declaration of Independence* and wrote our Constitution). They are good people, ordinary "Americans" in the very best sense. "Jack" (Mark Wahlberg) is an accountant and a devoted family man, and his wife "Abigail" (Rachel Weisz), nestled in his warm, loving arms, is a homemaker. Abigail has deliberately stepped back from the more flamboyant excesses of her own mother "Grandma Lynn" (Susan Sarandon), totally dedicating herself to the well-being of her children.

Susie is quite specific about the date of her murder: "I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973." Count backwards, and that means Jack and Abigail were both born sometime during the Great Depression, and they were children during World War II. Therefore, creating a safe, nurturing environment is a great accomplishment for them, and they think they've succeeded. Susie, their firstborn, is smart, pretty, and popular; "Lindsay" (Rose McIver) has already been tracked into a "Gifted" program; "Buckley" (Christian Thomas Ashdale), though still just a kid, is playful and affectionate. All three Salmon children are full of promise.

Once they are finally convinced that Susie is gone, however, Jack's malignant guilt eats away at him from the inside, and losing Jack as well as Susie causes Abigail to unravel. When Jack asks Grandma Lynn to come help out, Abigail flees. But even though he's obsessed, hounding the police constantly with meaningless "clues," Jack still manages to go to work every day and bring a paycheck home every week. Lindsey pushes herself athletically (consciously determined to fight back should anyone ever threaten her), while Buckley goes to school and soccer practice, implicitly accepting Grandma Lynn as his new "mother." Slowly the household settles into new routines.

Meanwhile "Ray Singh" (Reece Ritchie), Susie's boyfriend, takes his own painful steps forward. Leaving school for the last time on the day of her murder, Susie is carrying a love note from Ray in her bag, but she only finds out about it when a girl named "Ruth" (Carolyn Dando) finds the letter and gives it back to him. Sensitive and artistic, Ruth

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feels Susie's continued presence in the Inbetween, and by validating Ray's despair, she helps him to accept it and move on.

With an excellent cast and all the tools of cinema at their command (especially music, sound design, and special visual effects), director Peter Jackson and his team members do an excellent job of finding the core truth in this poignant story: even after she's dead, Susie's world is brighter, more vivid, and more passionate than Mr. Harvey's world can ever be. Even as they grieve, the people in Susie's world continue to share, to love, to bond in new ways, and to grow older, and yes, wiser together. But Mr. Harvey is always alone; once his victim is gone, he has no one and nothing to fill the emptiness inside.

And so, despite its tragic premise, watching *The Lovely Bones* is an enlivening and enriching experience for its audience. Human life, with all its joys and sorrows, is shown to be full of possibility and hope for the future, and Susie's last words are precisely the right words: "I wish you all a long and happy life."

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Note: Saoirse is pronounced Sear-Sha (rhymes with inertia).



Stanley Tucci as "George Harvey."



Mark Wahlberg as "Jack Salmon."

### **SPOILER ALERT:**

**Please do NOT read until AFTER you have seen *The Lovely Bones*!**

Susie is quite specific about the date of her murder: December 6, 1973. "It was still back when people believed things like that didn't happen," Susie says, but that's not quite correct. Everyone knew that women and girls (yes, even women and girls from good homes and good families) were routinely abused, raped, and sometimes even murdered. And everyone knew the perpetrators were often the victim's intimates: fathers, brothers, uncles, neighbors. People knew, they always knew, they just didn't talk about it.

1973. Alice Sebold doesn't tell us why she picked this specific year for this particular story, but I can tell you that the US Supreme Court issued its *Roe v Wade* decision on January 22, 1973, and that's when everything started to change for women, at least in this country. Women in many other countries, countries without our laws and without our freedoms, still suffer in silence. When she first arrives in the Inbetween, Susie thinks she's "a one;" it takes her some time to understand (and accept) that she's actually one of many. Mr. Harvey has killed before and he will kill again, and he is also one of many.

As a novelist, Alice Sebold has no need to make an overtly political point or become personally embroiled in any of the rhetoric of the acrimonious pro-life/pro-choice debate. By telling the story of one life cut short with such skill and grace, Sebold also makes a case for all the girls and all the women whose lives have been brutally impacted by male violence.

Regular readers of my reviews already know that I deliberately avoid all source material before I see a film, even though this stance sometimes puts me behind a curve in popular culture. I'd certainly heard buzz about Sebold's novel. I knew Oprah had featured *The Lovely Bones* on one of her book club broadcasts, I kinda sorta knew it was narrated by a dead girl, and maybe I had even heard somewhere along the way that Sebold herself had once been raped.

But when I learned for sure that director Peter Jackson and his screenwriting collaborators Philippa Boyens and Fran Walsh planned to do a film adaptation, I did my best to forget all of this. By the time I entered the theater on Tuesday, December 1 to attend a critics screening, I can honestly tell you I had no idea what to expect. Furthermore, I'll also confess that it took me some time to "get it."

After an hour or so, while I was still trying to figure out where the Inbetween was, I became vaguely aware of the fact that the colleague to my left (another woman) was sniffing. I remember wondering if she had a cold. But very soon after that I began to realize that "Holly" (Nikki SooHoo), Susie's friend in the Inbetween, was another victim, and then I started crying, and I knew instantly that my colleague was crying too.

I was supposed to see another film that day, but when *The Lovely Bones* ended, I went into the Ladies Room to wash my face, knowing I was completely spent. I went home, still deeply moved, and the next day I bought the book. Since that time, I have read the book, seen the film three more times, and done the requisite background research on Alice Sebold, her life, and her rape.

It's true: sometime during the winter of her freshman year in college, Alice Sebold was brutally raped. She survived, but later the police told her that another girl had been raped in similar circumstances. The police told Alice she was lucky to be alive; the other girl, they told her, was not so lucky. No, I didn't consciously know any of this the first time I saw *The Lovely Bones*, certainly not in any depth or with any clarity, but by the time I reached the Ladies Room, I felt the full weight of what I had just seen.

Furthermore, having had the luxury of watching the film several times now, I am in awe of its delicate construction. The truth is I really believe this film is even better than its

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source book. The filmmakers have pared the narrative down to its essential elements, and they have honored all of Sebold's intricate symbolism (for example, it's no accident that Mr. Harvey keeps Susie's remains in a "safe").

But locating Susie in the Inbetween and giving her a "work" she must do before she can get to Heaven helps us understand the importance of her story. Violence against women is horrible in its concrete particulars, but recognizing its truly universal dimensions can be galvanizing.

"When Everything Changed" is actually the title of a new book by *New York Times* columnist Gail Collins:

"Once young women had confidence that they could make it through training and the early years of their profession without getting pregnant, their attitude toward careers that require a long-term commitment changed. They began applying to medical, law, dental, and business schools in large numbers. This was an enormous shift." (Page 102)

1973 was a milestone year for American women, and women are now active participants in almost every aspect of modern American life. Am I saying that female doctors, female lawyers, and yes, female filmmakers (whose career opportunities followed a similar trajectory) are more inclined than their male counterparts to see violence against women from the victim's perspective? You bet!

If I ruled the world, *The Lovely Bones* would be nominated next week for a Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar, but there is almost no chance that this will happen. Culturally, we're still kinda sorta stuck in the Inbetween. Just like Susie, we have some work to do before we can get to Heaven.

To learn more about Alice Sebold's firsthand experience with violence and how it affected her own life and career, read Katherine Viner's excellent interview *Above and beyond*:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/aug/24/fiction.features>



Lifelong movie buff Jan Lisa Huttner is the managing editor of *FILMS FOR TWO: The Online Guide for Busy Couples* (a website devoted to promoting films of interest to both male & female audience members). She writes monthly columns for Chicago's *JUF News*, as well as freelance articles for numerous print publications & websites. Her article on the 2004 Oscars for *Women's eNews* received the award for "Best News Writing – Web" from the National Federation of Press Women in September, 2005.



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