

estival

fresh film festival

Study Guide



fresh film

Stand By Me

Rob Reiner, USA, 1986, 87 mins

Watching the Film

Credits

Director	Rob Reiner
Writers	Bruce Evans, Ray Gideon, Raynold Gideon, Stephen King
Producers	Andrew Scheinman, Bruce Evans, Ray Gideon, Raynold Gideon
Cinematographer	Thomans Del Ruth
Production Design	Dennis Washington
Costume Designer	Sue Moore
Composer	Jack Nitzsche
Editor	Robert Leighton
Make-Up	Steve Nicolaides
Foley Editor	Jeffrey Stott

Casting	Jane Jenkins, Janet Hirshenson
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Cast

Gordie Lachance	Wil Wheaton
Chris Chambers	River Phoenix
Vern Tessio	Jerry O'Connell
Teddy Duchamp	Corey Feldman
The Writer	Richard Dreyfus
Denny Lachance	John Cusack
Ace Merrill	Kiefer Sutherland
Billy Tessio	Casey Siemaszko
Lardass Hogan	Andy Lindberg
Principal Wiggins	Art Burke
Eyeball Chambers	Bradley Gregg

Casting

The Casting Director is the individual who hires the various actors in a film. This includes arranging casting sessions which the director may also attend, viewing videos of prospective actors and arranging contracts for those actors hired.

In many major studio productions the producer often negotiates with leading stars, who are hired independently, before pre-production begins.

Foley Editor

Many sounds in a film may not be recorded at the time of filming or may be of such a specialised nature that they may have to be added in later. A specialist in sound effects, the foley editor records sound effects for various shots in the film to be included in post-production. These may include such basic sounds as the sound of footsteps on ground right through to the sound of a lasergun for a sci-fi movie. The foley editor would record the sounds in a studio and add them into the film later. The title 'foley artist' is named after Jack Foley who pioneered modern techniques in this area of recording.

Stand By Me

'Stand By Me' is based on the Stephen King novella 'The Body' and details four friends' search for the body of a young boy who has gone missing. When one of them overhears a conversation about the location of the body, they go on a journey to a wood on the far outskirts of their town to find it. Set in 1960, the journey takes on epic proportions as they must come to terms with their own personal fears to achieve their aim. In the end it seems that their trip together may be more important than the destination.

Title

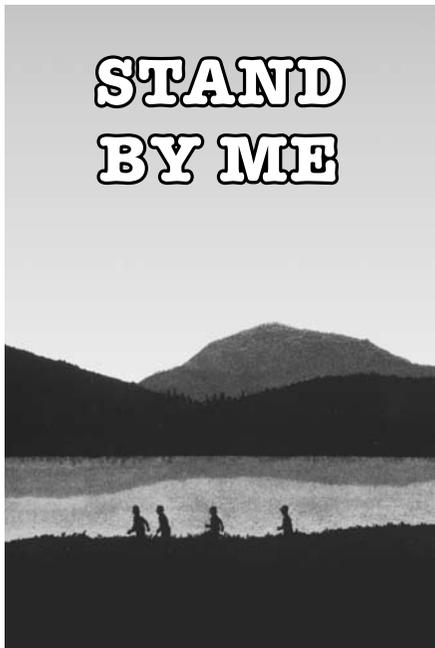
'Stand By Me' is based on the Stephen King's novella 'The Body'. The producers of the film have decided to change the title. They have picked the title of a song (Ben E. King's 'Stand By Me') from the period the film is set in to be the film's title. They also use the song in the film's soundtrack.

Task

Why do you think the film title is different that that of the books'? Do you think that the phrase 'Stand By Me' tells us more about the film than the phrase 'The Body'?

Why have the maker's chosen the title of a song from the period for the title of the film? Does this have any relevance to the fact that the title song 'Stand By Me' was re-released at the time of the film's release? What is the purpose of releasing both song and film at the same time?





Image

On the left is a poster for the film. The poster image also features on the cover of the video and soundtrack. The photograph features the four main characters in the movie in silhouette, walking in the vast open countryside.

Looking closely at the image will suggest some ideas about the story. In the image the characters are moving left to right across the countryside. This suggests that they are on some sort of a journey. The fact that they are not bunched together in a group, that they are seen as individual silhouettes conveys that they each are individuals, with individual personalities.

Their placement in the image implies the huge journey they are undertaking. Their size in the image suggests that they are small and perhaps insignificant, and that the world is larger and stronger. This is contrasted with the freedom the image expresses - four individuals in a group, with no-one else around.

Task

Reflecting on the title and the image together, does this give you a better idea regarding what the story will be about?

Finally, would the poster image make you interested enough to want to go and see the film? Can you give reasons for this? If your answer is no, What other information would you need to encourage you to go see the film?

Historical Context

'Stand By Me' is set in 1960 in America. Although the film does not reflect much of the politics of the era, it suggests a period of time before American civic and cultural life changed. 'Stand By Me' is set before the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy; before the Watergate Scandal which caused the removal from office of President Nixon and before the radical shifts caused by the counterculture movement of the 1960's.

So while 'Stand By Me' is a somewhat nostalgic look at young people's lives in 1960, it offers a realistic viewpoint on life, touching on issues such as abuse, alcoholism, mental illness and family life.

Reflecting also that 'Stand By Me' was made in 1986, it may be a comment on the Reagan era in America in the 1980's which encouraged a return to traditional family values, such as those thought to be prevalent in the America of the 1950's. 'Stand By Me' above all suggests that the praised family values of the 1950s and early '60's were probably a falsehood.



The Director Rob Reiner



The son of film director Carl Reiner ('Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid'), Rob Reiner was born in New York in 1945. He attended UCLA, during which time he formed an improvisational acting company called "The Session", which also featured Richard Dreyfus (who appears in 'Stand By Me'). Reiner spent much of early career in television, firstly writing for the "Smother's Brothers Comedy Hour" and then appearing as the character "Meathead" in the series "All In The Family" for which he won two Emmy awards. During the '80's, he began to direct feature films starting with the classic spoof documentary 'This Is Spinal Tap'. As well as adapting 'Stand By Me', he also directed Stephen King's 'Misery' or the screen. More recently he directed Michael Douglas in 'The American President'.

An Outline

An Outline is a synopsis of the plot of a film. It gives a brief account of the story and characters and is used as a guide as to whether the prospective film will be made. It is usually about 500 words long. A production company can option a treatment or screenplay from this source.

The Outline stage is followed by a Treatment, in which the story is fleshed out to about 10 - 40 pages and includes the full action of the film - scene by scene.

The Treatment is followed by a Screenplay which includes location, action, dialogue, sound and some details regarding shooting the film.

The following is a suggested outline for Stand By Me

Sitting in his jeep, Gordon Lachance reads an article in a newspaper, which details how well-known attorney Chris Chambers was killed in a recent stabbing. He thinks back and we hear his voice:

"I was twelve , goin' on thirteen when I first saw a dead body."

Flashback to 12 year-old Gordon Lachance sitting in his treehouse in the town of CastleRock in 1960. He is playing cards with his friends Chris Chambers and Teddy Duchamp. They smoke and tell each other jokes. They are joined by their friend Vern Tessio, who tells them of how he overheard his brother discussing the whereabouts of the body of a missing boy, which they saw the previous night. Vern's brother had stolen the car and is more afraid to explain this to the police than report the body.

The boys decide to go and search for the body, creating a story that each of them is staying in one another's house, to cover them for the 2 days travel that will take them 20 miles outside town. They think that finding the body will make them famous.

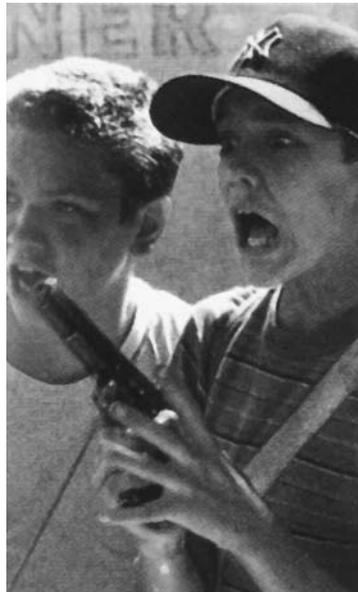
Following the railway track which leads near the woods will lead to where the body is rumoured to be. Chris shows Gordie the gun he has brought, which he has stolen from his 'drunk' father. Gordie mistakenly fires the gun. The boys run off to the track and are joined by Vern and Teddy. They walk along the tracks. Teddy reveals a disturbing aspect to his character when he stands on the track and waits to dodge an oncoming train. The other boys pull him off onto the embankment.

They climb a fence at the town dump, knowing that the dump gates will be open when Mr. Pressman, the dumpkeeper returns and they will be able to sneak through at that time. However, Gordie loses a bet and has to go and get food in the meantime. Upon returning, Gordie finds that Mr. Pressman is back and the dump-man sets his notorious dog 'Chopper' on him. Gordie runs for it, egged on by his friends who have already scaled the fence. Gordie makes it just in time. Outside the fence, they verbally abuse Mr. Pressman, who retorts that he knows who they are - Chris' family are known around town - a bad breed and Teddy's father is in 'the loony bin'. The boys respond angrily, but walk away hurt.

Teddy has been injured by Pressman's words but the boys decide to continue on. They come to a steep rail bridge which overlooks the local river. The bridge is so narrow, that they have a debate as to whether they should cross it. The alternative is a 20 mile round trip, so they decide to cross it. In the middle of the bridge, a train comes. Chris and Teddy make the other side but Gordie and Vern dice with death as the train bears down on them. They make the other side - but only just.

Chris and Gordie share their personal fears with each other. Chris worries that when he goes to Junior High School, after the summer, he will be put in all the 'shop' classes - the classes for the less academically minded, simply because of his family's bad name. Gordie tells Chris that he thinks his father hates him. His brother Dennis, a high school sports star died only 3 months ago in an accident and Gordie believes that his father would have preferred it if Gordie had been the one who had died.

It's beginning to get dark, so the boys decide to camp out. Gordie, who is beginning to write some stories, tells them the tale of a fat boy called 'Lardass' who gets his revenge on a mocking town. The boys sleep is disturbed by wild animals in the woods, prompting fears of a haunting by the dead boy.



Local gang leader Ace Merrill has also found out about the body and he is also on his way to the location.

In the morning, the boys travel on, coming to a swamp, which looks safe enough but when they trod into it, they find themselves neck deep in water. Added to this is the realisation that they have been attacked by leaches. Gordie has the unfortunate task of having to prize a leach away from his private parts, causing him to faint. This incident sets in motion a debate about whether to carry on. The others begin arguing, but Gordie comes to the fore by saying that he is going on. The others fall in step behind him.

They finally come upon the body. It is the corpse of a boy their age. Viewing his body makes Gordie think about his dead brother and he cries. Whilst debating about what to do now, Ace Merrill and his gang come on the scene. The two groups face each other off.



But Gordie fires Chris' gun in the air, settling the matter. Gordie's group will have the prize of the body and the attached fame

But in voice-over, the narrator describes how they finally made an anonymous call to the police. Facing the fact that it could have been one of them killed in an accident such as the one that caused the death of the boy, they resign themselves to covering the body and making a phone call.

Back in their home-town, the boys split up reluctantly, realising that it may be the last time they are together before going to Junior High School.

In a voice-over, the adult Gordon Lachance tells us of the fate of his three friends, one dead, one in prison and one working back in his home town. He also believes that he never had friends like the ones he had when he was twelve.

Theme

A theme is a unifying concept or message that runs through a film (or book etc.) that gives both a focus for the film-maker making the film and provides the audience with a core message to take from the film. Many works of art may exist on various levels and provide both a core theme and also different sub-themes within the same work of art. This reflects both the fragmentary nature of all our individual viewpoints and provides for a deeper experience when watching a film or play.

Task

What is the theme of 'Stand By Me'?

Some of the following statements from the film may help you-

'Kids lose everything unless there's somebody there to take care of them' (*Chris to Gordie*)

'I never had any friends like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?'
(*the Narrator - The adult Gordon Lachance*)

'Do you think I'm weird?' (*Gordie to Chris*)

'Everyone's weird' (*Chris to Gordie - in answer to the above*)

'Chopper' (the dumpkeeper's dog) was my first lesson in the difference between myth and reality'
(*the Narrator - The adult Gordon Lachance*)

The above statements suggest varying themes; confusion and fear about growing into adulthood; nostalgia about the past and an underlying need for brotherhood (or sisterhood) among a group of ones peers and a realisation that adult life is much different in reality than what one has heard. Look at the film again and try and decipher an underlying theme.



Character Types

Storytelling is an art form. As such it has structures and norms that have been handed down from generations, just as painting might have rules regarding composition and perspective. One of the methods used by story-tellers the world over is setting up reflective character types who signify certain aspects of the human condition and therefore express in a single character a simplistic mirror image in which we can reflect ourselves and also project ourselves into the story by allowing us to view a facet of our own personalities in the film.

'Stand By Me' uses this in a clever way. By using a group of young people, the film-maker and writer can give us a group of characters who still have much to achieve. Despite suggesting the jaundiced views of teenagers, the characters carry hopes and dreams that many adults have long since lost.

Stephen King has set up 4 main characters with which to play off against each other, in order to create a stronger dramatic story line.

Chris; The boy from the wrong side of the tracks, whose greatest fear is that he is being overlooked because of his background.

Gordie; The nascent writer - the creative member of the group. It is significant that he has one of the few private and sensitive moments in the film, when he watches a small deer pass by on the rail tracks.

Teddy; Teddy has been described as 'crazy' by his friends. Teddy has a devil-may-care attitude. His fathers' mental illness has already shaped him. It has given him a license to go further into danger.

Vern; Vern is a figure of light relief, an overweight boy who thinks only of his hunger. Vern serves as a symbol of selfishness and as the character who is the slowest in reaching adulthood.

Task

'Stand By Me' also offers the image of another group - that of Ace Merrill's gang. One commentator has described this group as a 'debased' version of Gordie's gang further into their teenage years. Do you think this is true? What has caused Ace Merrill's gang to become debased? Are Gordie's group headed in the same way?

and

Look around your school group, your family members of any other group that you are involved with. Are some people in the group already regarded as character types? You may see individuals' regarded as leaders, the figure of fun or the budding creative. Do we accept these generalisations about others too readily or are they a method of understanding each other in a simplistic manner?

Looking at the film

Soundtrack

The soundtrack of the film 'Stand By Me' features a host of songs from the late 1950's. These include:

<i>Everyday</i>	Buddy Holly
Yakety Yak	The Coasters
<i>Great Balls Of Fire</i>	Jerry Lee Lewis
<i>Stand By Me</i>	Ben E. King

The soundtrack evokes the period that the film is set in and thus lends an air of credibility to the events in the film. A soundtrack acts as an effective marketing tool, and a product in its own right. The song 'Stand By Me' was number one in the charts shortly after the release of the film. The playing of this song on the radio acts as a recognisable connection to the film and through this name association brings both the film and the song to a wider audience. Both products work in tandem to market each other.

The major studios in America are part of vast entertainment corporations. They may release a film and also provide the film with a soundtrack made by artists on the roster of a sister company. In this way, the studios are able to instigate a wide-reaching marketing campaign that may cover a film, an associated soundtrack, an associated computer game, associated toys and clothing among other things. This blanket production ensures that the film reaches as widest an audience as possible.

Task

Look at a film soundtrack or score in your local audio shop. Can you trace the film and recording companies involved? Are they part of a larger organisation?

Or

Select a group of songs that represent your life at the moment. Do they have a similar style. Do the lyrics have a similar theme? Do the songs suggest any cinematic images?

Bibliography

Books

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'American Cultural Studies', Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, Routledge, 1997

'Children in the Movies' - Neil Sinyard, Batsford Books, 1992

Video

'Stand By Me' - Cinema Club. Columbia Tri-Star Films.

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