

# The Wretched (film)

***The Wretched*** is a 2019 American supernatural horror film written and directed by the Pierce Brothers. It stars John-Paul Howard, Piper Curda, Zarah Mahler, Kevin Bigley, Gabriela Quezada Bloomgarden, Richard Ellis, Blane Crockarell, Jamison Jones, and Azie Tesfai. The film follows a defiant teenage boy who faces off with an evil witch posing as the neighbor next door.

*The Wretched* had its world premiere at the Fantasia International Film Festival on July 19, 2019, and was released in drive-in theaters and through Premium VOD on May 1, 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic limiting the number of films in theaters, it became the first film since *Avatar* (2009) to top the box office for six consecutive weekends.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

## Plot

In 1985, Megan arrives at the home of the Gambels to babysit their daughter, Ashley. As she enters the basement, she finds Ashley being eaten by an inhuman creature in the form of Mrs. Gambel. Terrified, she attempts to escape, but Mr. Gambel shuts the door on her, trapping her down there with the creature. A strange sign is then shown to be etched on the door.

In the present, 17-year-old Ben Shaw comes to live with his father, Liam, as his parents are in the middle of a divorce. Liam gives Ben a job working at the marina, where he befriends a fellow employee named Mallory. During his shift, he notices Liam kissing his co-worker, Sara, and gets angry. During a hike in the woods, Dillon, the son of Liam's neighbor, Abbie, finds a tree with the same symbol seen as that at the Gambel house. He hears what sounds like Abbie's voice coming from the tree, calling to him before the real Abbie appears behind him. As they return home, they hit a buck, and Abbie decides to bring it with them. When Abbie attempts to gut it, putrid, black entrails spill out. Later that night, something crawls out of the buck's corpse.

Ben investigates strange noises he hears on the roof. He follows the sounds to Abbie's house, but discovers it was only a raccoon. He then catches a glimpse of a witch on the porch, but cannot be sure what he saw due to Abbie's husband, Ty, turning on the porch light. Ben befriends Dillon and makes him promise to tell him if he sees anything strange around their house. That night, Abbie goes to

### The Wretched



Theatrical release poster

<b>Directed by</b>	The Pierce Brothers
<b>Written by</b>	The Pierce Brothers
<b>Produced by</b>	Chang Tseng Ed Polgardy Brett Pierce Drew Pierce Travis Cultreri
<b>Starring</b>	John-Paul Howard Piper Curda Zarah Mahler Kevin Bigley Gabriela Quezada Bloomgarden Richard Ellis Blane Crockarell

check on her infant son, Sam (Dillon's younger brother), in his crib. However, she finds that he has disappeared and has been replaced by a bundle of sticks. She is then attacked by the witch. Ben returns home from a local party later that night and notices Abbie walking into the forest with a child, but is interrupted by an angry Liam who had been searching for him after Ben didn't return any of his calls.

The next morning, Abbie, disheveled and filthy, returns to her house, where she ominously stares at Dillon as he watches TV. While at work, Ben dumps trash in the boat of the local bully's father as revenge for him and his friends cruelly pranking him at the party. That night, he is driven home by Sara who reveals she's lactose intolerant and tries to bond with him. Ben finds Dillon hiding in his room, claiming that there is something wrong with his mother. Abbie comes looking for Dillon, threatening Ben and attempting to get into the house. Fortunately, Ty soon arrives and takes Dillon home. Dillon tries to warn Ty that Abbie is acting weird, but he dismisses his son's concerns. Afterward, Ty visits Sam's nursery, which is now empty. However, he doesn't seem phased by this.

	<u>Jamison Jones</u>
	<u>Azie Tesfai</u>
<b>Cinematography</b>	Conor Murphy
<b>Edited by</b>	Terry Yates
<b>Music by</b>	Devin Burrows
<b>Production company</b>	Little Runway
<b>Distributed by</b>	<u>IFC Midnight</u>
<b>Release dates</b>	July 19, 2019 ( <u>Fantasia</u> ) May 1, 2020 (United States)
<b>Running time</b>	96 minutes
<b>Country</b>	United States
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Budget</b>	\$66,000 ( <u>est.</u> ) <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Box office</b>	\$4.4 million <sup>[2]</sup>

Ben becomes concerned that something strange is happening with Abbie and attempts to spy on her until interrupted by Liam. Later, as Abbie is shown having sex with Ty, it is revealed that her flesh has begun to decay. At work the next day, Ben learns from Mallory that Dillon never showed up for his sailing lesson. When he goes to Dillon's house to check on him, he is greeted by Ty, who denies even having children. Before leaving, Ben finds the ominous symbol carved into the porch.

Ben researches the symbol and finds information about an evil forest witch said to wear the skins of her victims and "feed on the forgotten". He confides in Mallory as they observe Abbie suspiciously emerging from the cellar with a trash bag. But she doesn't take Ben seriously and mocks him, even going so far as to slip a taunting note under Abbie's door, proclaiming they know what's in her cellar. Meanwhile, Ben begins spreading salt around his house, as it is capable of repelling witches. When Ty finds the note and attempts to investigate, Abbie appears and whispers something demonic to him, causing his ears to bleed. That night, as Mallory locks up the marina office, it is revealed that the picture of her sitting with her mother and younger sister, Lily, has mysteriously disappeared from the employee bulletin board.

Later, Ben becomes even more suspicious after discovering the trash bag Abbie was carrying contained various items from Sam's nursery. The next day, as Abbie steps out of the shower, it is revealed that her entire body has now decayed considerably. After seeing Abbie emerge from the cellar again, Ben breaks in and finds a deer skull and a picture of the family with Ty's face scratched out, along with the missing picture of Mallory's family (with her and her mom's faces scratched out as well). He realizes that Lily is the witch's next victim. He calls Mallory to warn her that Lily is in danger, but Mallory doesn't seem to remember her sister. Ben rushes to save Lily, but is interrupted by the local bully, who attacks Ben for vandalizing his father's boat. After escaping, Ben tries to catch up with Lily, but he is too late, arriving just as the witch pulls her into the tree. He tries to pull Lily out, but he loses his grip and gets knocked out after hitting his head on a rock.

Upon returning home, Ben finds that Liam has called the police to report him missing. Ben attempts to explain what is happening with the neighbors, but given his recent strange behavior, Liam merely accuses him of being on drugs and refuses to listen. Sara appears and Ben tries to talk to her, but is shocked to see her pouring creamer in her coffee. Noticing that the flowers around her are decaying, Ben realizes the witch is now inhabiting her skin. When Sara tries to attack him, Ben slashes her arm with a kitchen knife. But the witch reverts to normal and makes it look like Ben attacked her for no reason.

Ben is then taken into custody. From the police car, he sees Sara whispering something in the officer's ear. He tries to warn Liam that Sara is the witch and pleads with him to check the neighbors' cellar. Instead of taking Ben to the station, the officer drives Ben to the beach, where he attempts to drown him until he gets attacked by a dog. The officer shoots the dog and then himself after realizing that he is being controlled by some dark force. Meanwhile, Liam explores the neighbors' house, where he discovers the dead bodies of Ty and Abbie. He also finds a disturbing shrine containing the neighbors' family picture Ben saw before, along with a picture of his own family, where his, Ben's, and his wife's faces are scratched out.

The now-possessed Sara arrives and attacks Liam, causing him to drop his lamp. Just as she is about to kill him, Ben arrives and shoots her with the officer's gun. The witch (now in her true form) crawls out of Sara's corpse and goes after Ben, but he takes Liam to the safety of the latter's car as the neighbors' house burns down, burning all the pictures the witch stole. When the picture of Ben's family is destroyed, Ben suddenly remembers that he has a little brother, Nathan. All Ben's true memories come back, revealing Nathan had been present throughout all the events so far, and has been taken by the witch.

Mallory arrives looking for Lily, and the two head to the tree to rescue their siblings. Ben descends into the witch's lair while Mallory stays behind to spread salt around the tree. After Ben manages to save Nathan and Lily, he is about to escape when the witch emerges and grabs him. Just as she begins pulling Ben back in, Liam drives into the forest, distracting the witch long enough for Mallory to throw salt in her face and free Ben. Liam then rams into the witch with his car.

Several weeks later, Lily has begun seeing a therapist to deal with the traumatic event. It is revealed that after escaping the witch, Ben and Mallory burned the tree, then aided the injured Liam. Back in the present, Ben and Nathan plan to move back to their mother's house. Mallory gives Ben a flower she took from a bouquet Lily sent to the marina office, and the two share a kiss goodbye. Mallory then takes three children out on the water for a sailing lesson. Liam explains that he is going to stay with his brother, Rory, while he recuperates and thinks things through. As they depart, Ben attempts to smell the flower Mallory gave him, and is shocked to discover it's fake. As only real flowers decay in the witch's presence, it is implied that she survived and has possessed Mallory, who is now alone, in the middle of the lake, with three young children.

## Cast

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- John-Paul Howard as Ben Shaw
- Piper Curda as Mallory
- Jamison Jones as Liam Shaw
- Azie Tesfai as Sara
- Zarah Mahler as Abbie
- Kevin Bigley as Ty
- Gabriela Quezada Bloomgarden as JJ
- Richard Ellis as Gage

- Blane Crockarell as Dillon
- Judah Abner Paul as Nathan Shaw
- Ja'layah Washington as Lily
- Amy Waller as Nora
- Ross Kidder as Officer Guthrie
- Kasey Bell as Officer Kopitar
- Sydne Mikelles as Megan
- Tug Cocker as Mr. Gambel
- Madelynn Stuenkel as The Wretch
- Owen Thomas Pierce as Baby Sam
- Kenzie Jones as Ashley Gambel
- Ryan Alexander Holmes as Adam
- Pamela Gray as Counselor Rutland
- Ice as old fisherman's dog

## Production

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Filming took place around Omena and Northport, Michigan, near the Pierces' hometown.<sup>[5][6]</sup>

Composer, and childhood friend of the Pierce Brothers, Devin Burrows composed the film's score. According to Burrows in a 2020 *Nightmare on Film Street* interview, he visited the film's shooting locations prior to principal photography, to work the natural influence and inspiration into the music.<sup>[7]</sup> The trio also worked together on the Pierce Brothers' 2011 film *Deadheads*.

## Release

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The film premiered at the Fantasia International Film Festival on July 19, 2019.<sup>[8][9]</sup> It also screened at the Traverse City Film Festival, and at the Toronto After Dark Film Festival. It was released in selected theaters (mainly drive-ins), and through Premium VOD in the United States on May 1, 2020.<sup>[10]</sup> The film was released in cinemas in the Netherlands on June 25, 2020.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Reception

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### Box office

*The Wretched* grossed \$1.8 million in the United States and Canada, and \$2.5 million in other territories, for a worldwide total of \$4.3 million.<sup>[2]</sup>

Due to limited theater exposure and few films playing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, *The Wretched* was #1 at the box office in its opening weekend, earning \$65,908 from 12 theaters.<sup>[12][13]</sup> The film finished first again the following weekend with \$69,608 at 19 theaters, for a 10-day running total of \$165,294.<sup>[14]</sup> The film remained in first the following four weekends, making \$91,975 from 21 drive-in theaters in its third,<sup>[15]</sup> \$215,836 from 59 in its fourth,<sup>[16]</sup> and \$181,000 from 75 in its fifth.<sup>[17]</sup> It became the first film to top the box office five weekends in a row since *Black Panther*, which opened in February 2018,<sup>[18]</sup> although it was noted that *Trolls World Tour* would have likely come in first over the course of its release had its weekly grosses been made public.<sup>[19]</sup>

The film then made \$207,212 from 99 theaters and crossed the \$1 million mark, topping newcomer *Becky* by \$1,415 to remain in first for the sixth straight weekend (the first film since *Avatar* in 2009 to do so).<sup>[20][21]</sup> It was finally dethroned in its seventh weekend, finishing third, behind *Becky* and *Infamous* with \$148,583.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Critical response

On *Rotten Tomatoes*, the film holds an approval rating of 75% based on 110 reviews, with an average rating of 6.2/10. The website's critics consensus reads, "*The Wretched* stirs up a savory blend of witch-in-the-woods horror ingredients that should leave genre fans hungry for a second helping from writer-directors Brett and Drew T. Pierce."<sup>[23]</sup> On *Metacritic*, the film has a weighted average score of 61 out of 100 based on 15 critic reviews, indicating "generally favorable reviews".<sup>[24]</sup>

Jeannette Catsoulis of *The New York Times* gave the film a largely positive review, writing, "Blessed with shivery setups and freaky effects—here, skin-crawling is literal—*The Wretched* transforms common familial anxieties into flesh, albeit crepey and creeping."<sup>[25]</sup> Geoff Berkshire of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "What the Pierce brothers lack in flavorful storytelling or compelling characters, they almost entirely make up for in good old-fashioned atmosphere and suspense. *The Wretched* rarely surprises, but it's well-crafted enough to get under your skin anyway, with an able assist from the creepy camerawork of cinematographer Conor Murphy and unsettling score by Devin Burrows."<sup>[26]</sup>

Writing for *RogerEbert.com*, Simon Abrams gave the film 1.5 out of 4 stars, saying that "unlike *Stranger Things*, *The Wretched* is a little too cute about teen angst, and not light enough on its feet to make you want to root for its ostensibly typical adolescent."<sup>[27]</sup>

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## External links

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