# Movie Review: 'Zodiac'

*by Lee Grant*

"Zodiac," the movie, is a killer.

Zodiac, the killer, is an elusive psychopath who terrorized and taunted the Bay Area beginning in the late '60s, mocking police and newspaper reporters who became fixated on nailing him.

They never did.

'ZODIAC' - Robert Downey Jr. and Jake Gyllenhaal are employees of the San Francisco Chronicle who get tangled up in the hunt for a serial killer in the drama 'Zodiac.' CNS Photo courtesy of Merrick Morton. Director David Fincher, noted for dark and disturbing tales like "Fight Club" and "Seven," has made a provocative film that is less about the grisly details of the murders - though they are presented in gripping set pieces - than what the obsession to find the manipulating maniac did to the journalists and detectives enveloped by this grim, tough case.

There is a great, spellbinding vignette when the Zodiac picks up a pregnant woman carrying an infant whose car broke down on the side of a dark, isolated road (the setting shot ominously by cinematographer Harris Savides). "You know you're going to die," Zodiac tells her, matter-of-factly. It's a hold-on-to-your-armrests moment.

There have been other "Zodiac" films, including one that played in a few markets last year starring Justin Chambers, Dr. Alex Karev on TV's "Grey's Anatomy."

Fincher's is larger in scope and more complex and loaded with a starry cast - Jake Gyllenhaal as Robert Graysmith, the San Francisco Chronicle editorial cartoonist on whose books the picture is based; Robert Downey Jr. as Paul Avery, the Chronicle's rambunctious crime reporter fashioning near-daily Page 1 pieces; and Mark Ruffalo as dedicated S.F. homicide cop David Toschi (the inspiration behind Clint Eastwood's "Dirty Harry"), whose gnawing intensity takes a personal toll.

To this day, Graysmith is still on Zodiac's trail, showing up recently on "America's Most Wanted" to schmooze with frenzied host John Walsh. Gyllenhaal plays Graysmith as part schlemiel, part bright amateur sleuth intellectually seduced by the rambling, grammatically elementary correspondence Zodiac mailed to Bay Area newspapers. Many of them began, "This is the Zodiac speaking," and he demanded they be published.

Gyllenhaal captures the sensitive Graysmith's attempt to balance family and job responsibilities with a yearning to be in the midst of the Zodiac tumult. His is a more interesting character than comes through in Graysmith's dull and tedious book, the turgid writing of someone less concerned about storytelling than with making sure every detail of every investigation is down on paper.

Even more convincing is Downey, a colorful, eccentric newspaperman who follows the biggest story of his career from San Francisco to Riverside, Vallejo to Sacramento. He pushes a little too hard, disrupting the comfort zone of his editors even at a newspaper that loved sensational murder stories on Page 1.

Downey is fascinating, a daring actor who, at 41, gets better with age. He knows firsthand, too, the kind of substance-abuse depths to which Avery succumbed. It's a chilling, often sad, performance.

Fincher has a cinematic thing for men under stress, and he's in his element guiding Gyllenhaal, Downey and Ruffalo. His most notorious film, "Fight Club," is a visceral slug to the belly with blood-soaked acting from Brad Pitt and Edward Norton.

In an interview with Esquire magazine, Fincher said of his films, "That sense of loneliness, the sense of not fitting in or being out of depth, is probably the most common denominator."

Psychological experts characterized Zodiac just that way, according to Graysmith's book: "He lives the secret life of seclusion and presents to the world a mask of containment, pleasantness and ordinariness."

Fincher is a stickler for details, and because of that the film has a rich sense of reality. He re-creates the Chronicle newsroom of the late '60s complete with manual typewriters, reporters dressed blandly doing their jobs without computers, without cell phones.

"Gyllenhaal is dressed in the same kind of sweater vest and cords I wore in 1968 when I was a young political cartoonist," Graysmith writes in an addendum to the paperback edition of his book. The newsroom "is reborn perfectly on a block-long set - everything is authentic: light fixtures, old typewriters, molding, U-shaped copy desk. Everything works - old phones, drinking fountains, elevators, and pneumatic mail tube stations ... desk drawers are even stocked with Chronicle notepads and Eagle pencils. You wouldn't know the difference."

This is a newspaper movie where the reporters actually take notes.

Fincher, 44, knows the Bay Area, having grown up in Marin County. He was a kid when Zodiac was making

boogeyman-like headlines. As a backdrop, he utilizes cogently music from the era, putting Donovan's "The Hurdy Gurdy Man" to particularly good use.

"Zodiac" is a crime buff's playpen, engorged with such characters as a Salinas history teacher and his wife, who break one of the Zodiac's codes, and a creepy fellow named Arthur Leigh Allen, the one suspect who both police and Graysmith think is the rampaging murderer. "I'm not the Zodiac," he says, when Ruffalo and Downey catch up to him, "and even if I was, I wouldn't tell you." The man died before he could be indicted.

Then there's celebrated attorney Melvin Belli, offering to represent Zodiac if he turns himself in. The craggy Brian Cox ("Running with Scissors") handles the role with a perfect balance of bluster and eye for publicity. Showing up on a local TV talk show, the white-maned Belli suggests the killer change his name from Zodiac to something less ominous, like "Sam."

At more than 2 1/2 hours, "Zodiac" is like a deep, involving book, a page-turner that you can't put down. You keep reading and, in this case, you keep watching.

RATINGS4 stars - Excellent.3 stars - Worthy.2 stars - Mixed.1 star - Poor.0 stars - Forget it. A Paramount Pictures and Warner Bros. Pictures release. Director: David Fincher. Writers: James Vanderbilt (screenplay) and Robert Graysmith (book). Cast: Jake Gyllenhaal, Mark Ruffalo and Robert Downey Jr. Running time: 2 hours, 34 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

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