

MOTHERFLICKERS



The Menacing Matriarchs of Noir

Steve Kronenberg



*What ya need is Motherly Love. . .
Forget about the brotherly and otherly love.
Motherly love is just the thing for you.*

Ya know your Mother's gonna love ya 'til ya don't know what to do.

Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention recorded “Motherly Love” in 1967. They were singing about themselves, of course, and their message was directed to every groupie within earshot. But “motherly love” isn’t confined to the corridors of rock & roll history. Three of noir’s most memorable characters were moms. Their deviant demeanor defined both the films in which they appeared, and their own sons’ twisted psyches. All three women are rock-hard, take-charge matriarchs who know how to control their boys.

Mrs. Hughes | *My Name Is Julia Ross*

Dame May Whitty etched a niche playing likable, nosy old crones in such films as *Night Must Fall* (1937) and *Gaslight* (1944). But in 1945’s *My Name Is Julia Ross*, Whitty morphed from dotty dowager to diabolic *grande dame*. She plays Mrs. Hughes, a murderous matron bent on protecting her spoiled, demented son Ralph (George Macready), who has recently murdered his wife. She lures the innocent Julia Ross (Nina Foch) into her employment as a secretary, then kidnaps the girl and poses her as Ralph’s deceased wife. Mother and son have concealed the murder and conspire to steal Julia’s identity, then dispose of her and disguise her death as the suicide of Ralph’s slain spouse.

Butter wouldn’t melt in the mouth of Whitty’s black widow. She begins spinning her web with deceptive sweetness, dazzling Foch’s Julia with tenderness and kindness. She advances Julia’s salary and, in a charming sing-song voice laced with affection, tells the girl: “You take it and go shopping!” Once Julia departs, Mrs. Hughes ends the masquerade and segues into a hardened harridan. She reviews her master plan with her son and underlings while barking commands: “I want all her clothing destroyed. Every bit of it. We’ve all got jobs to do. Let’s do them.” Whitty’s metamorphosis from cold to comforting gives *Julia Ross* its unnerving edge. She continually calls Julia “Marion,” the name of her late daughter-in-law. With her soothing, mellifluous voice, she pretends to serve Julia/Marion’s every need—from offering tea and



food to locking the door “in case you should walk in your sleep and hurt yourself.” As a noir mother, Mrs. Hughes is unique. She displays her maternal side both to her real son and her bogus daughter-in-law. It’s Whitty’s winning, solicitous style that lends credence to the improbable sham she’s concocted. The fraudulently charming matron even has her maid, neighbors, and local vicar convinced that Julia is indeed her real daughter-in-law. When the abducted girl tries to convince the townspeople of the scam, Mrs. Hughes has her alibi ready: “Marion” has had a nervous breakdown and doesn’t know what she’s saying. “Motherly love” turns Julia Ross’ world upside-down, eroding her identity and sanity.

The old woman’s consumptive sense of control also rules her weak, psychotic son. When she’s not pretending to soothe Foch’s confused Julia, she’s angrily berating Macready’s overgrown child for playing with knives or throwing temper tantrums. The scheming mother and degenerate son suit each other. In a critical scene, they casually discuss how the real Marion was murdered and then, with equal repose, plan Julia’s demise. The conversation has the breezy informality of cocktail chatter. It’s obvious that Mrs. Hughes will do anything for her corrupted child. Yet, she remains detached and icy, more dominant than maternal. She’s consumed, even corroded, by her need to manage everyone in her twisted milieu. Whitty’s talent for playing sweet old ladies served her well. Mrs. Hughes is a memorably disarming and deceptive character.



The Jarretts, Cody (James Cagney) and his Ma (Margaret Wycherly), are a pair of cold-hearted psychopaths whose warmth and affection is reserved exclusively for each other. Their maternal bond is one of the most twisted in cinema history

Ma Jarrett | *White Heat*

There's nothing deceitfully charming about Margaret Wycherly's Ma Jarrett in *White Heat* (1949). Ma has no façade. She's a stone-faced professional criminal with a black heart. But Ma's obsessive love for her psychotic son Cody (James Cagney) is unmistakable. Ma and Cody complement each other: psychologically, one is incomplete without the other. In her scenes with Cagney, Wycherly displays warmth and affection, despite her stoic, stone-faced demeanor. Ma neither cares about nor recognizes her son's twisted persona. She loves him for what he is, striving to soothe both his bruised ego and his agonizing headaches.

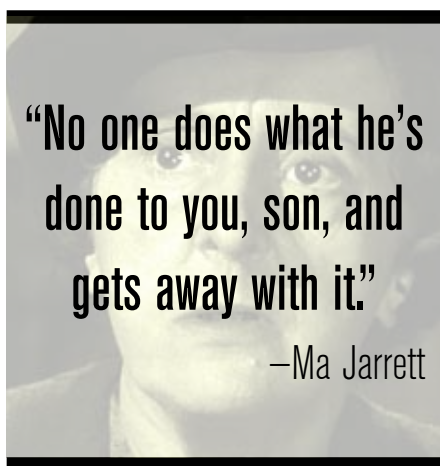
The headaches are a byproduct of the mother-son bond, a method Cody has always used to draw additional affection from his mother. When Cody's first onscreen migraine occurs, we see how effectively the hypochondria works. As Cody thrashes and screams in pain, Ma gently takes his head, massages it, and quickly relieves him. When Cody needs his mother, the brutal killer morphs into a five year-old child. Ma also guards Cody's self-esteem, painfully aware that the attacks are a sign of weakness to the members of his gang. "Don't let 'em see ya like this," she advises him. "Might give some of 'em ideas." She then pours him a

slug of liquor and toasts him with a "top o' the world"—the film's signature line (Martin Scorsese later marveled at this scene, commenting: "He's crazy and he sits on his mother's lap—a middle-aged man!"). Ma accepts and enables Cody's psychosis. But she's also his better half, bringing out whatever tenderness and frailty he has left.

Wycherly is billed as a supporting player in the film's credits. But Ma is far more than a secondary character. Because she defines Cody as a twisted Mama's boy, she becomes *White Heat*'s psychological linchpin.

Ma is also Cody's stabilizer, the steely and rational yin to his explosive yang. It's Ma who convinces Cody to do away with a wounded cohort who has a tendency to talk too much. She's able to coldly size up Cody's underlings and his sexy, but seamy wife Verna (Virginia Mayo). Ma rightly advises Cody to trust no one, feeding her son's ever-growing paranoia. Verna's a faithless, trashy trollop, but Ma's hatred for her may be driven more by incestuous jealousy than anything else. But no one in

Cody's orbit draws Ma's wrath more than Steve Cochran's Big Ed. Ma knows that this young, smooth sleaze seeks to replace Cody as gang leader and bedmate to Verna, with whom he's having an affair. The adoring mother conveys her mistrust to Cody and he listens up, confronting Big Ed with a knowing smirk: "Ya know. If I turn my





Not even the man's own wife—vixenish voluptuary Verna (Virginia Mayo)—stands a chance against the love shared by Oedipal outlaw Cody Jarrett and his beloved Ma in *White Heat*

back on Big Ed long enough for him to put a hole in it, there'd be a hole in it." Ma's filial devotion is boundless. She's willing to risk her life to rid her beloved Cody of his vicious rival. "Anytime I can't handle his kind, I'll know I'm getting old," she intones. "No one does what he's done to you, son, and gets away with it." Unlike Dame May Whitty's Mrs. Hughes, Ma Jarrett's stone-faced veneer can't conceal her genuine, if thoroughly warped, maternal warmth.

Even the police know that Ma and Cody share an indelible, near-Oedipal bond. They follow her every move, but she's always two steps ahead. She's smarter than they are, smarter even than Cody. Ma is determined to protect her son after she witnesses his senseless murder of a police detective. When the cops haul her and Verna in for questioning, she handles the grilling with cool panache. Her alibi is airtight: when the cop was killed, Cody wasn't in town and she and Verna were at a drive-in watching *Task Force*. She smugly describes the movie as "excitin'. Verna liked it." She stares down her interrogators and confidently challenges them to produce evidence linking Cody to the killing: "I don't know much about the law but I hear ya need *witnesses*." She knows the bluecoats have nothing on her. She casually walks out, but not before she calmly acknowledges Verna's crocodile tears: "Stop cryin', Verna. Nobody's gonna hurt ya."

After Ma is killed, her ghost continually haunts *White Heat*. Her death also gives us a rare peek at Cody's vulnerability. His famously berserk reaction to her demise is one of noir's pivotal moments (the extras in the prison mess hall were not given advance warning of Cag-

ney's hysteria; their shocked reactions are genuine). Later, he plans a daring heist based on the saga of the Trojan Horse he recalls Ma telling him as a child. Ma's post-mortem influence is also invoked in a touching exchange between Cody and Edmond O' Brien's Pardo (an undercover detective who wins Cody's trust and becomes his surrogate mom). Alone with his new confidante, Cody solemnly discusses imaginary conversations with his dead mother: "Good feelin', talkin' to her. . . just me and Ma." But in *White Heat*, it's *always* just Cody and Ma. Even in the film's fiery finale, a solitary Cody kisses both Ma and the world goodbye with his "Made it, Ma! Top o' the world!"

It's Cody's relationship with Ma that makes *White Heat* more than just a routine gangster drama. The psychological link between mother and son edges the film squarely into noir. In *The Ultimate Book of Gangster Movies*, George Anastasia and Glen Morrow credit Cody and Ma's dynamic as ". . . a new wave of movie making. . . This was film noir." Director Jack Hill opined that Margaret Wycherly was ". . . brilliant as the most monstrous mom since Agrippina." Eight years before *White Heat*, Wycherly nailed an Oscar nomination as Gary Cooper's saintly mother in *Sergeant York* (1941). Ma Jarrett may be a far cry from Mother York. But to her son Cody, she's not only saintly, she's angelic.

Eleanor Iselin | *The Manchurian Candidate*

Ma Jarrett loved her son too well. But is she "monstrous?" That moniker belongs to Angela Lansbury's Eleanor Iselin in *The Manchu-*



The imperious Eleanor Iselin (Angela Lansbury) is the manipulative mastermind behind the presidential campaign of Sen. John Yerkes Iselin (James Gregory).

rian Candidate (1962). Lansbury's dark side had already been explored in such films as *Gaslight* (1944) and *Please Murder Me* (1956). But Eleanor Iselin is arguably noir's most malicious Medusa. She conspires with Communists to brainwash her own son Raymond (Laurence Harvey) into assassinating a Presidential candidate. The murder will allow her dimwitted husband (James Gregory) to ascend to the White House, with Eleanor and her Communist cohorts pulling his strings. Obsessed with power, the woman has no capacity for warmth—a sharp contrast to Whitty's Mrs. Hughes and Wycherly's Ma Jarrett. Lansbury plays Eleanor as a human cipher, perfectly dressed and coiffed, with a waxen face and a heart of ice. Her own son is her most conspicuous victim, a broken man destroyed by his mother's domination. When mother and son are together, she's either programming him to kill, or tossing insults at him: "Raymond, why do you always have to look as if your head were about to come to a point?" At a masquerade party (where she's appropriately costumed as Little Bo Peep!), Eleanor orders the sullen Raymond to stop being "... such a jerk. Go get yourself a drink or a tranquilizer or something."

Raymond knows his mother has danced with the devil. He emphatically describes her to Frank Sinatra's Ben Marco as "a terrible woman. A terrible, terrible woman." But, like Ma and Cody, Eleanor and Raymond are inextricably linked. Each is a mirror image of the other. Both are detached, cold, vacuous. Mother's noxious influence has ravaged her son. Eleanor's tentacles even put the squeeze on Raymond's one chance for happiness: his love for and impending marriage to Jocelyn Jordan (Leslie Parrish). Raymond and Jocelyn adore

each other, but she's the daughter of Eleanor's most hated and feared political rival. The relationship is doomed from the start. Threatened with losing control over her son, she viciously convinces him to end the romance. The weakened Raymond accedes to her wish and to her power: "She won, of course. She always does. I could never beat her." It's no coincidence that Raymond is programmed to kill whenever he sees a Queen of Diamonds playing card. Its regal image is the symbol of his own imperious mother.

Eleanor's pivotal scenes come near *Candidate's* conclusion. She sets the crucial assassination in motion by instructing Raymond on when and how to murder her party's Presidential nominee. Her orders are delivered in an eerily placid tone, as if she were asking her son to fix her a drink. The calm slowly builds to a crescendo. She tells Raymond that a bad moon will rise when she takes control of the White House "with powers that will make martial law seem like anarchy!" But Eleanor's psyche is truly defined by the final words she shares with Raymond: "I told them to build me an assassin. I wanted a killer from a world filled with killers and they chose you because

they thought it would bind me closer to them." Her twisted notion of "motherly love" is revealed as she vows revenge on her co-conspirators for victimizing her son. Refusing to recognize her own complicity, she promises that "... they will be pulled down and ground into dirt for what they did to you—and for so contemptuously underestimating me!" Lansbury speaks these lines in a precise, near-whisper, suffusing the scene with an unnerving sense of dread and quietude. She convinces us that the monster mother is more concerned with her ego than the torture she inflicts on her son. But the ambiguity in their

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—Eleanor Iselin



"I never really advanced in movies beyond *The Manchurian Candidate*," Angela Lansbury told TCM's Robert Osborne in 2011. "I ran it the other day in my apartment and I was absolutely shocked by it." More recently, she credited the film as "... the most important movie I was in. Let's face it. . . You can't live down a part like that."

relationship persists. Eleanor gently holds her son's hand and delivers her parting gesture, a long, incestuous kiss that implies the kind of Oedipal bond shared by Ma and Cody Jarrett. But is this gesture impelled by guilt, gratitude, or twisted love? *The Manchurian Candidate* plunges us into a nightmare, its surreal mood augmented by Eleanor's hellish persona.

Frank Sinatra originally wanted Lucille Ball to play Eleanor Iselin. *Candidate* director John Frankenheimer had previously worked with Angela Lansbury in *All Fall Down* (1962), in which she played Warren Beatty's doting mother. He advised Sinatra to view the film. He did, and was immediately sold on Lansbury. At a 2011 screening of *Candidate*, the actress spoke with Robert Osborne and reflected on her Oscar-nominated portrayal of Eleanor Iselin. "I never really advanced in movies beyond *The Manchurian Candidate*," she remarked. "I ran it the other day in my apartment and I was absolutely shocked by it." More recently, she credited the film as "... the most important movie I was in. Let's face it. . . You can't live down a part like that." Lansbury stayed true to her words. *The Manchurian Candidate* was her final foray into film noir. Broadway beckoned to her. "I'm going to sing now," she declared. "I'm going to make you happy by singing."

Mrs. Hughes, Ma Jarrett, and Eleanor Iselin share a common thread of dysfunction with their sons and within themselves. All three enable (and spawn) their children's psychoses. Still, Eleanor is a breed apart, willing to oversee her son's destruction for a grab at power. In the dark milieu of film noir, she deserves special recognition. ■



It took 264 episodes playing genteel crime solver Jessica Fletcher in *Murder, She Wrote* to counterbalance the evil malevolence Lansbury displayed in *The Manchurian Candidate*