

# Helen Mirren, Ian McKellen in *The Good Liar* : The consequences of light-mindedness

By David Walsh  
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*Directed by Bill Condon, written by Jeffrey Hatcher, based on the novel by Nicholas Searle*

American film director Bill Condon (born 1955), we commented in 2015, “has an eclectic body of work.” His early films, *Gods and Monsters* (1998) and *Kinsey* (2004), about British-born director James Whale and US sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, respectively, remain his most interesting efforts. They had a certain oppositional feel (and anger) to them, at least in regard to conventional morality during the Clinton-Bush era.

However, the WWSW went on, in its review of Condon’s *Mr. Holmes*, the filmmaker “has also written or directed some trivial works, or worse, including *Chicago* (2002, which he wrote), *Dreamgirls* (2006), *The Twilight Saga* (two parts, 2011 and 2012!) and, most disgracefully, *The Fifth Estate*. The latter work, a hatchet job on WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange (played by Benedict Cumberbatch), left a particularly foul taste in the mouth.”

In a period piece, such as *Mr. Holmes*, we continued, “the director can avoid revealing in so direct a fashion his accommodation to the status quo and the accomplished fact. However, something of his essential conformism on important matters, colors *Mr. Holmes*. It is not an impressive work.”

Essential conformism on important matters seems an apt summing up of Condon’s film career to date. At any rate, *The Good Liar*, released last year and now available for streaming, will not do much to change one’s attitude.

The new film ostensibly concerns an aging conman, Roy Courtney (Ian McKellen), who has his sights set on the considerable life savings of a widow, Betty McLeish (Helen Mirren), a former Oxford history professor.

Courtney and his partner in crime, Vincent Halloran (Jim Carter), are simultaneously engaged in cheating the greedy, stupid Bryn (Mark Lewis Jones) and an associate (Lucian Msamati) out of several hundred thousand pounds. Roy, in dealings with one of his underlings, who foolishly demands a larger share of the take, and with the aggrieved Bryn, who eventually comes upon and follows Courtney on a busy

London street, proves quite cruel and ruthless.

Roy and Betty become quite close, or so it seems. He easily manipulates her into asking him to stay at her bland suburban home and, without too much further ado, begins suggesting they pool their money and open a joint offshore investment account. Her grandson Steven (Russell Tovey) expresses skepticism about Roy and openly suggests he is only after Betty’s savings.

On a holiday trip that Roy and Betty take to Berlin, things begin to unravel. Steven has discovered that “Roy Courtney,” a British army officer, was shot and killed in the German capital in 1948 by a wanted Nazi war criminal, who also died in the same incident. Roy then confesses that, yes, he is not Courtney, but Hans Taub, the British army officer’s translator. He adopted Courtney’s identity and has been living in Britain since the postwar years under that name. He begs forgiveness, and Betty is happy to oblige.

It is impossible to discuss *The Good Liar* seriously without giving away its denouement, so the reader needs to be forewarned.

Roy and Halloran go ahead with their end of the swindle, planning to empty the joint investment account of every penny, but Betty, we discover, is way ahead of them.

More than that, much more than that, her real name is Lili Schröder, and she is the daughter of a German businessman.

In 1943, in a flashback, a young Hans Taub (i.e., the present-day “Roy Courtney,” played by Spike White) is tutoring Lili (Nell Williams) in English. After Lili’s three sisters humiliate him when he tries to kiss one of them, Hans proceeds directly upstairs and rapes Lili. Aware that Hans has done something amiss (although not precisely what), Herr Schröder (Daniel Betts) throws the youth out of the house. The next day, Hans denounces Lili’s father to the Nazi regime as a traitor, who then hang him. In despair, Frau Schröder (Stella Stocker) soon kills herself, and the other Schröder girls later die in an air raid. Betty/Lili has a serious, 70-year-old score to settle, and settle it she does.

*The Good Liar* imparts all of this startling information in its final moments. It is not very convincing at almost any

level. A relatively light-hearted work (with admittedly nasty overtones) about an unsubtle scam (why would a former Oxford professor fall for such a thing?) transforms itself out of the blue into another of the “feminist revenge narratives,” for which, we are told, these are now “boom times.”

The sequences set in Germany in 1943 are the least persuasive. The viewer is asked to believe that Hans-Roy, who does not show signs of psychopathology, rejected when he tries to *kiss* one girl, cold-bloodedly decides to *violate* another—in the middle of the day in her highly respectable, upper-middle-class home, with every other member of the large household within shouting distance. One can only draw the conclusion that heterosexual men must be very, very wicked and dangerously out of control.

Condon has made various disclaimers about any link between the #MeToo movement and his latest film, whose production clearly began after October 2017. For example, “There are a lot of ways in which I’ve described *The Good Liar* in the last four or five years since reading the novel, but timely wasn’t one of them,” Condon told the *Hollywood Reporter*. In fact, whenever the director may have come upon the novel, an announcement about the teaming up of Condon, McKellen and Mirren on *The Good Liar* was only made in mid-March 2018, well after the sexual witch-hunt was under way. Shooting began in late April 2018.

“I’m surprised that it’s timely, because we didn’t do anything to make it relevant,” Condon asserted. And furthermore, “There’s a worry that people might think we were exploiting something—that somehow we’d made the whole movie on the heels of that stuff happening and we were using it as a plot point in entertainment.” The comments seem disingenuous.

Screenwriter Jeffrey Hatcher is a little more candid. He told the *Hollywood Reporter* that *The Good Liar* was written and filmed “at the height of #MeToo.” Hatcher explained, “You’re writing this and shooting it at that same time, and so there’s a little bit of the current politics that flood into it. . . . You never want to flood in in such a way that it swamps the film, but you can’t ignore it either.”

The opportunistic jumping on the #MeToo bandwagon, and its bludgeoning of elemental rights is bad enough, but the most harmful aspect of *The Good Liar* is its implication that an unreported sexual assault is a world-historical event worthy of discussion in the context of the Nazi genocide. In fact, if one were to take the logic of the film seriously, Hans’ action flows into and becomes one with the “other crimes” of the Hitler regime. They exist somehow on the same historical and moral plane.

Moreover, how many films have treated an event in Nazi Germany, whose emergence was the single most catastrophic event of the 20th century, as a mere backdrop

for a purely personal episode and the springboard for a purely personal revenge?

Veteran performers like McKellen and Mirren, who are effective throughout, as much as the contrived narrative permits them to be, might be horrified by such a question (Mirren has only recently made a documentary film dedicated to Holocaust victim Anne Frank), but this is what the current dreadful fixation with gender politics leads to. We are confronted with a film in which fascist barbarism is only mentioned, as it were, “in passing,” a mere plot device on which to hang the case of an unreported sexual assault.

The degree of unseriousness and light-mindedness, and social blindness, is staggering.

Nicholas Searle, the author of the novel, is a pen-name for a former British intelligence officer, who—to fill out the picture—completed the book “while studying at a writing school set up by the literary agents Curtis Brown.” Someone will mention novelist John le Carré, but leaving aside the fact that le Carré’s social and foreign policy criticism has definite limitations, “Searle” is no le Carré.

*Guardian* critic Mark Lawson inadvertently summed up the significance of the novelist’s self-serving lumping together of Hitler’s crimes with sexual abuse and con artistry, which carries over into the film, in his 2016 review of the novel. Lawson, in banal postmodern language, explained that Searle was “far from the first writer to use the art of the confidence trick—‘one big lie is all you ever need’—as a metaphor for the things that governments and individuals do in other circumstances, but these layers of liars add to the impact. A successful novel is also a sort of swindle (making a fiction sound convincing, misleading the reader about where things are going), although with the difference that a good one should provoke a desire to be duped by the same person again.”

In a world where everyone is some sort of liar, the lies—like Hitler’s or, for that matter, George W. Bush’s and Tony Blair’s—that result in the deaths of millions hardly stand out. This cynical notion is not surprising coming from a British civil servant “who spent much of his time working on security matters,” but any serious writer, director or actor should be ashamed to be associated with it.

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