

# The Pop Culture CELA: “The Taking of Deborah Logan”

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Hello again, constant readers, your Pop Culture CELA has returned with another movie to review and recommend. As the days get shorter, Spirit Halloween Stores start occupying every abandoned strip mall, and the leaves begin to turn so turns the genre of movies I tend to watch. The summer blockbusters and Oscar Bait are shelved in favor of more spooky fare. While I always try to revisit the classics, a few modern horror movies work their way into my repertoire. This is where I first ran into The Taking of Deborah Logan, a truly frightening and striking Horror film. Upon revisiting the 2014 film, I couldn't help but note how much of this film expounds on factors and circumstances many of my clients and their families must endure.

The Taking of Deborah Logan is a “Found Footage Film” about a documentary team studying a small family's experience while navigating an aggressive case of Alzheimer's affecting the title character, Deborah Logan. The documentary team witnesses Mrs. Logan's symptoms and struggles turn from frustrating, to tragic, to something more insidious and supernatural. The 2014 film was directed by Adam Robitel (Escape Room, Insidious: The Last Key) and starred Jill Larson (White Squall, Shudder Island) and released by Millenium Entertainment. The film features gripping performances, a tense score, and a believable mix of special and practical effects that combine to create a pins-and-needles sense of dread from start to finish. What starts as an empathetic, almost meditative examination of the effects of Alzheimer's on a family slowly crescendos into an absolute nightmare during its 90 minute running time. With that said, The two overarching themes that I found striking were the experience of Ms. Logan while navigating cognitive disease and its subsequent effects on her adult daughter/caretaker, Sarah Logan.

Deborah Logan begins the movie as a pillar of her community afflicted with the early stages of Alzheimer's. After losing her husband at a young age, Mrs. Logan supported her family by starting and operating her rural community's first phone switchboard. By doing so, she created significant success and independence for herself and her small family. Jill Larson powerfully portrays a strong, fiercely independent woman slowly being robbed of her most important principles by tragic circumstance. She begins grasping for words, misplacing important items, and experiencing confusion during conversations. As her disease becomes more aggressive, Mrs. Logan experiences extreme mood swings, hallucinations, fugue states, and attacks those closest to her. These tragic circumstances mirror the experiences of so many of our elderly population. As her disease escalates, supernatural and frightening manifestations begin to occur.

I could not help but notice the care and research put into an individual's experiences with Alzheimer's both as to the writing and Larson's portrayal. Behaviors such as, acting as if nothing is wrong in the midst of confusion, unease with people touching her, discomfort with people moving her personal items, and even a very subtle instance of reactivity when approached from her non-dominant side show that

people involved with this movie either performed extensive research or had personal experience with cognitive disease prior to production. I was reticent before re-watching this movie because I thought the portrayal of Alzheimer's in a Horror film could very easily be exploitative. I found the opposite experience my second time through *The Taking of Deborah Logan*. The writing and portrayal of a person navigating a chronic and progressive disease came from a place of great empathy.

In a mirror to Mrs. Logan's journey, her daughter Sarah is confronted with the impossible task of being a family caregiver under incredibly difficult circumstances. From her first appearance on screen, Anne Ramsay (*A League of Their Own*, *Critters 4*) portrays the harried and tense Sarah masterfully. Sarah is walking in the footsteps of so many of my client's families as a caregiver. Sarah must balance her mother's day-to-day care with maintaining the family's finances amidst mounting medical bills. Sarah is in an impossible position from the very beginning. She left her job and her life to become her mother's caregiver, her mother's condition is worsening at a shocking rate, and neither she nor her mother are generating enough income to cover medical costs and their everyday expenses. Sarah copes with increasing alcohol consumption to the point where it concerns those around her. The movie takes pauses to note her personal life unraveling from under her while her own health is declining. This is sadly the experience of many families I work with. Being a caregiver is physically and emotionally taxing to the point of causing irrevocable damage to so many who engage in it. Couple with this a lack of financial support or access to resources for the family, and you have a recipe for tragic circumstances. The time and care put into examining Sarah's experiences as a family caregiver are evidence of the filmmakers' grasp of the true weight Alzheimer's puts on the family as well as the patient.

You will likely notice that I haven't talked much about the more supernatural aspects of *The Taking of Deborah Logan*. I am avoiding doing so for two primary reasons: I always hate when movie reviews spoil shocking aspects of a movie and I truly think the non-supernatural portrayal of Alzheimer's and its affects are just as horrific, if not more-so, than the more fantastical elements of the movie. With that said, circumstances start to spin out of control as a malignant presence enters the fray and the film takes a truly frightening and horrific turn as it sprints toward an impactful conclusion. There are themes of exploitation of elders, uncertainty of the future, and losing family members while they are still living are very powerfully portrayed and palpable in the film's final acts. While I will not spoil the ending for you, I highly suggest you watch it. You may want to keep the lights on during the final act though...

To sum up my experience re-watching *The Taking of Deborah Logan*, I would say that I was really moved by the film's careful portrayal of a family's journey through such a violent and tragic disease like Alzheimer's. Horror is a unique genre in its ability to utilize fantastical and extreme imagery/story beats to shed light on very human experiences. What could have been a cheap, exploitative story was equal parts intimate and horrific. It was not lost on me how many families I have worked with have dealt with the circumstances we find the Logan family managing at the beginning of the movie. *The Taking of Deborah Logan* is a very challenging movie. Its subject matter could be very difficult for people whose lives have been affected by Alzheimer's. With that said, it is a very careful and empathetic examination of the disease and an extremely effective drama as well as a very scary movie. I would highly suggest this film if you are looking for a horror movie with a lot of depth and pathos.