Click to verify

Reviewed By Steve Stred Over the last few years and with the boost from Grady Hendrix and his release ‘Paperbacks From Hell’ there has been a resurgence in the classic books of horror, originating from the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s. While I haven’t managed to read ‘Paperbacks…’ yet, the trickle effect has been noticeable, from book bloggers and reviewers sharing photos and reviews of books they discovered or re-discovered from that release to Valancourt Books having a line in conjunction specifically with Hendrix devoted to the ‘Paperbacks From Hell.’ One such book from this release has morphed from a known book of misogynistic themes to an almost mythical level of desire. ‘Let’s Go Play At the Adams’’ has become sought after and is often featured on wish lists of books people most desire to own. I recently acquired a copy of ‘Let’s Go Play At the Adams’’ which was the lone release from author Mendal W. Johnson. It has been noted that after his death three other novels in progress were found, but as of yet there appears to be no push to have them released/finished and none of them were tied into ‘Let’s Go Play…’ Mr Johnson has become enigmatic in that not much information is fully known, but some details have trickled out. He was married twice and had two children, loved sailing and was a journalist for some time, specifically focused on marine life and sailing. Because this book has developed a bit of a cult-like status amongst horror aficionados, I’ve decided to delve deeper into this tale than I normally do with reviews. So be warned – this feature WILL contain spoilers. And just a final warning here – some of the subject matter may be difficult for some people to digest or read. Synopsis: The synopsis on its surface is mundane, to say the least. Barbara is hired to watch the two Adams children, Bobby and Cindy, while their parents go on a trip to Europe. The Adams’ are newer to the town but as Mr Adams is the local doctor, they’ve been welcomed with open arms. The two children have befriended the McVeigh children who live nearby. Dianne, John and Paul have become such good friends with Bobby and Cindy that they’ve created their own club – Freedom Five and they like to play games. What Barbara doesn’t know is that the five children – aged 10-17, have decided their next game is to imprison her – and go from there. Tagline: The paperback I tracked down had the tag line “A novel more terrifying than LORD OF THE FLIES & THE EXORCIST combined!” Some of the other marketing had focused on blurbs by major book reviewers at the time. Year of Release: 1974. An interesting side note is that Mr Johnson passed away in 1976 at the age of 48 from cirrhosis of the liver. Two years after the release of his lone novel, he was dead. Cover: The cover of my paperback version is simple, to say the least. The first few times I’d seen this version online, I’d initially thought it was actually a plate of cookies, not a dolls’ head. Mendal W. Johnson: The author himself didn’t achieve much in the way of literary notoriety while alive and it’s only been the last few years that this book jumped up another notch when included in “most sought after” lists. Part of the issue for the book now, is that it typically retails for between $50-$400 depending on quality and edition (paperback versus hardcover/1st edition vs later.) The prices sought are one of the reasons this book has developed the intrigue associated with it. The version I found was in good to great condition. The spine was immaculate and other than a weird darkening (which was probably caused by water contact) and some pressure indents, the book was in great condition. You can see the imperfections on the cover in the featured photo. I’d guess this version has never been read before. And yes, I smell my books – this one smelled pristine. An interesting note I’ll add here instead of further on, in the Further Reading section – from the link I’ll provide, it appears as though Mr Johnson detested children (though he himself had two daughters from his first marriage) which adds further intrigue to the basis of this story using children as the main characters. My Reading Experience: I’m not sure if it was the expectations of holding this paperback in my hands or what it was, but I found the book to be thoroughly engrossing. Johnson’s writing style was simple and straightforward. I found his descriptions to the point and some spots were breathtaking with its thought-provoking questions. ‘Can words and eyes and tone of voice alone persuade? Can anyone convince anyone else of anything at all? Is it ever possible to change the direction of things that are about to happen?’ That simple paragraph sums up this entire book and does it with both dread and anticipation. The book is 270 pages long (at least my paperback edition was) and that is on page 257. The entire time I read this book I knew what would become of Barbara. I knew she wasn’t going to make it but I held out hope, man alive did I wish she’d make it. It spoke to Johnson’s sensibilities to keep the violence and the horrific acts to a bare minimum up until the end. ‘Beneath the pile-on of the kids, Barbara made sounds one does not hear in everyday life, or at least not often. The various tones could be taken as sobbing, embarrassingly so.’ I was struck time and time again by Johnson’s philosophical musings told through the mind, eyes or mouth of a child character. As someone who has dealt with some mental health issues and spent time thinking about what happens when we die, I found Johnson’s thought process about this fascinating. One particular line near the end was fairly bang on. To paraphrase – ‘Is the end ever the end, or does it just keep going on forever.’ As Barbara falls deeper and deeper into her own madness at her situation she begins to think about only having days and then hours left to be alive. She thinks about all of the things she’ll never experience and she also thinks back on what she has experienced and how it stacks up in her mind. It’s heartbreaking when you begin to analyze that you are reading the final mental processes of someone in their early twenties, let alone at the hands of teenagers, children really. This book will make you emotional for so many different reasons throughout and I found I went back and forth between disgusted and crushed time and time again, sometimes within the same paragraph. One such moment that was very horrific was Barbara’s internal monologue about losing her virginity. John had raped her quickly, early on in the book. It was a moment that lasted only minutes at most. When she is near to her last day alive, John comes for her again. This time Barbara takes the time to think about how she’d want to remember her sexual experiences. John had been her first. Sure she’d kissed some boys, as Johnson writes, but that was her extent. She’d been saving herself for her casual boyfriend. She’d promised that after the summer break she would be ready to commit to him. Then John, a 16-year-old boy who was part of the group who’d imprisoned her, took what she was saving for someone else. It was one of the main parts of the book that truly broke her spirit. So Barbara thinks about what’s about to happen, John’s second raping of her and she decides two things. The first is that she wants to have an enjoyable sexual encounter. So even though she is tied up, she does her best to participate, to enjoy. The psychological aspect described here is incredibly unsettling (as most of the book is) but I found it to be a key plot moment near the end. What would you do in this situation if you knew you were going to be killed? Obviously, it’s a bit tougher for myself, being male, to fully relate to the female side of this, but I found Johnson really delved deep into Barbara’s inner workings here. If she was going to die and this was the only two times she would be experiencing sex, then she wanted at least one time to be enjoyable. The second thing Barbara did was to try and use her ‘active participation’ as a way to get John’s defences down and attempt one more time to get him to let her go. Throughout the book, Barbara has a running inner dialogue between ‘Sexy Barbara’ and ‘Normal Barbara’ which Johnson used as a good talking point leading up to this pivotal scene. Many of you who follow my social media accounts or even my reviews know I do all of my reading on my Kindle. This became a key part of my reading life last May (2018) after my wife got one for me as an early Father’s Day gift. When my son was born I co-slept with him. He’s almost three now and we still co-sleep. Because of this I wasn’t able to read physical books at all as we couldn’t leave a light on and I tried several book lights, but the act of trying to flip a page while reading with one hand just wasn’t possible. Since I was gifted the Kindle I have read 179 books. 100 last year and 79 this year. I cruised through this paperback, my first physical read in about two years, which is now my 80th book read this year (at the time of writing this). It was a neat thing to go back to reading a book while holding it in my hands. I made sure to not break the spine and I read it in thirty to forty-five-minute spurts while my son was sitting on me watching something or having some snacks. The Kids: The five kids that make up Freedom Five all go through various, thorough changes. It might be cringe-worthy to some, blasphemous to others, but I got the impression that this was a stab at writing a coming-of-age, psychological-horror tale. While it is based around a political/societal narrative of ‘what if good people do horrible things,’ I can’t separate the overall plotline as being anything else than coming-of-age. It’s just told from the point of view for a large portion of the book from the murderer’s side. Dianne – initially described as being tall and boring to look at (when reading this I had to remind myself that a man in his mid-forties writing this book, would still believe a woman would be longing for a girlish figure and to have the boy’s attention, especially in the 1970’s) she blossoms into a young woman by the end. Not in a sexual way, but by having to make solid grown-up decisions. She also transforms from idle participant to a dictator in charge of what will be happening. John – John starts off as a goofy boy, bordering on becoming a man. We find out he is sports driven, wanting to make the football team this next school year and that he feels a lot of lust towards women but doesn’t know how to process it completely. He still has some boyish pudge but has the frame of an older boy about to become a young man. He is instantly attracted to Barbara and determines that she can become his ‘practice’ girlfriend so that he won’t be embarrassed or ashamed when he gets a real girlfriend. At first, he is bashful when they cut Barbara’s clothes off while she is bound on the bed, but it soon morphs into him touching and probing whenever he can. I found it interesting how well Johnson had John justify it mentally that by raping Barbara he was helping himself become a better man to the future women in his life. He starts off as the implied leader of Freedom Five but once the game begins to intensify he quickly hands responsibility over to Dianne. Paul – Paul was an interesting character. I struggled to find a connection with how Johnson was trying to portray this character. At the time this book was released mental health wasn’t paramount and many people went undiagnosed with different issues. He was frequently described as having different ticks and spasms which at one point suggested maybe Tourette’s or schizophrenia. As Paul became more comfortable with the situation and more confident, his character becomes outwardly sociopathic. I expected this character to become the one to truly give the order to kill Barbara. Instead, he ended up being the one to dole out the first main form of punishment. Cindy – the youngest of the group, Johnson made her a caricature of annoying, bubbly little girls. I found her portrayal accurate to girls that age, at least from my experience. Most ten-year-olds want to be the centre of attention from their babysitter and want them to be played with as well as involved. Cindy didn’t go through too much of a transformation. I found that she become more emboldened with the incarceration of Barbara and enjoyed that she was involved with the entire process. Bobby – Bobby was my second favourite character that Johnson used throughout. A sweet, innocent kid, pushed along by the desire to see how far the game can be taken, but also by the fear of what will happen if they get caught. This was a plot point Johnson used time and time again and never once did it feel overdone or gave me a sense of ‘here we go again’. Bobby wanted to be involved and wanted John and Dianne’s approval, but he also didn’t want to hurt Barbara. The great crux of his internal struggle was that it was Bobby’s initial idea to tie up and gag her and as things progress and we move towards the inevitable outcome, Bobby can’t overcome his fear of punishment and being ostracized by the other kids if he let Barbara go. Bobby is the character I think most people who have dealt with peer pressure or bullying will connect with most. Barbara: I decided to give Barbara her own section completely, purely because this character deserves to be set aside from her captors. I found Barbara to have three distinct character transformations; fear, acceptance and ending. At the beginning, Barbara is having a great time getting set up watching the kids. For her this is an adventure – she’s travelled some distance to work for the Adams’ and being in college, she’s excited to be in charge. She’s working towards being a teacher and finds this job to be a trial run for her future career. Then Bobby chloroforms her one night and ties her up in her bed. Her first story arc is of fear. She can’t believe that this has happened, but she still believes that she’ll be able to either overpower or outsmart the kids. After all, she’s in college and they are in high school or younger. Then as the kids become bolder and set up a schedule and get Barbara into a routine, we begin to see the change happen. Soon we see her character enter into part two of her storyline – acceptance. At this point, Barbara believes she’ll stay tied up and lightly assaulted (as the transformation occurs she hasn’t been physically abused, but has been groped and rendered naked) but when the Adams’ return home, she’ll be released. She’s continually pleading and promising that if she’s let go she won’t tell anyone, but none of the children believes her. The last phase of her storyline or final transformation is the ending or her ending. She’s now been raped and Paul has begun to physically push his limits as to what he can do with sharp objects on her. She’s been deprived of basic human needs – they’ve limited her food intake to weaken her, only allow her to use the washroom twice a day and she isn’t being bathed or cleaned. Johnson does a stunning job of having her internal monologue spiral into madness throughout before we finally see Barbara reach her ending and give up. She’s accepted the fact that she’s a prisoner but the ending comes when she knows there’s no escape and that the children will go through with their plan and kill her. My only annoyance with the book that Johnson had was Barbara’s internal discussions with her college roommate Terry. It worked well to demonstrate Barbara’s continued descent but I felt no connection to the Terry character, nor in the epilogue as well. As I mentioned before – the entire time Barbara was captive, I hoped and believed that somehow she’d be released, be let go. Even when I knew it wouldn’t happen, Johnson did a fantastic job of giving Barbara internal hope, subconscious hope and that in turn was transferred to the reader. Current Political Climate: It struck me as fitting that I was reading a book published 45 years ago that had a message that fit directly with what is happening around the world. The main theme of “what happens when good people do bad things,” or “what happens when good people don’t stop good people from doing bad things,” basically plays out every day on every major news station. I won’t dive too far into my thoughts on how bad things are currently, but this book felt like it was written for this year, for 2019, not 1974. It made it feel timeless while being set 45 years ago. Ending: The ending occurs really in two parts. The first is the murder, which the children plot out deftly and ensure that a minor character of a field picker is accused. The second part is the prologue. The killing of Barbara is the first real description of extreme traumatic abuse towards Barbara. Up until then she’d been tied up, punched, groped, raped and Paul had dragged a knife across her. While the rape is a physical assault, the use of it in this story is more for the psychological damage it inflicts on Barbara and the beginning of the transformation of John. Dianne does, at one point, grab and twist one of Barbara’s breasts, but up until then, Johnson has downplayed those scenes to a degree. When it is time for Barbara to die, things ramp up. Barbara struggles but ultimately fails in her attempt to escape. Johnson comes full circle with the Paul character, now having Dianne allow him to begin the torture, and in doing so we get a grotesque description as the scene plays out. This part was really well done and for most people, they will find it almost too much to read. If it occurred within the first quarter of the book, I’d almost expect that to be most folks DNF place. I appreciated Johnson’s change in narrative tone at this part as well. At first, the experience starts out exciting and the kids all take their turns finishing Barbara. Then while they are torturing her, she dies, and Johnson explains how they all grow bored with her body, now that she’s not responding nor making noises. It read very similarly to how a lot of children are with toys that become discarded. The batteries die or a piece breaks off and it no longer works like it used to. So it gets buried in the bottom of the toy bin until eventually it’s tossed out. This was the essential basis for the entire buildup of the story and it was done incredibly well. The prologue is a different beast. It reads more like a summation of what happens after. We find out about the discovery of events by the Adams’ on their way home, then the follow-up investigation. The Freedom Five have ensured every detail has been thought of and that the blame gets pinned completely on the field picker. The Freedom Five ensure all of their stories jive and there are no discrepancies. I was blown away with the philosophical ending Johnson arranged and didn’t expect it. The horrendous act within the book appears to have been used as a device for the author to discuss the difficulties of peer pressure and as I mentioned before, what happens when someone doesn’t stand up to the group. Sequel: While Johnson didn’t release a sequel and none of his manuscripts that were unfinished were intended as a sequel a few other authors have attempted to write one. Whether this was to capitalize on the notoriety of the book or to try and make a decent effort to follow the children post murder, Johnson himself had done a decent enough job of philosophizing what was to come for the group. At this point, I have no interest in reading the ‘sequels’ as most reviews seem to suggest that they read closer to fan fiction than true sequels. Rating decision: If you are reading this review on Goodreads you’ll have already seen my star rating, but before I divulge it here, I wanted to go through a few things about my rating. I actually struggled with what to rate this. For me – no doubt this is an outstanding psychological thriller/horror novel. Sure it had some clunky parts and some odd writing tidbits, but this book will stay with me for a long time. I’m a person who doesn’t get triggered or find much to be too hard to watch or read, but the enduring horror of what this book describes will be on my mind for a long while. My struggle was the rewarding of stars versus the conversation of what does it say about myself. I found myself to be very introspective while reading this. I like to read horror and I’ve been known to write some dark stuff, but what does a 5-star rating for this say about me? As Matt Hayward tweeted recently; “Bad people doing and saying bad things in books is not an endorsement of those bad things.” But part of me felt like I should feel icky that I enjoyed this book so much. Shouldn’t I? Or is this what we expect from horror? To be repulsed, to squirm and to look in the mirror and ask ourselves ‘what would you do?’ If you were given the chance and were going to avoid punishment outright, would you kill someone? Punch them? Stab them? At its heart, ‘Let’s Go Play At the Adams’’ is exactly what horror is designed to do – make us think and look within ourselves. The last book that really got me thinking like this was ‘Odd Man Out’ by James Newman and that book still also sits in my brain and I frequently think about it. They both follow similar narratives of the group mentality versus doing what is right. Further reading/ Link to Sylvia Likens Murder: Much of the plot of this book has been suggested as being inspired by the brutal murder of Sylvia Likens in 1965 in Indianapolis, Indiana. In that case, 16-year-old Sylvia Likens was imprisoned, tortured, abused and eventually succumbed to her treatment over a period of three months. The people responsible were an adult caregiver, her children and several neighbourhood children. There hasn’t been anything specific to link the case directly with the story, other than the same use of one of the children, and the similarity of a young female being imprisoned before being killed. For further reading on both the book and the case, I’ve attached two links. Link #1 is part one of a three-part series looking further in-depth at Let’s Go Play At the Adams’ This second link is a Wikipedia link going over the Sylvia Likens incident. The Girl Next Door – Jack Ketchum The Girl Next Door is a book specifically inspired by the Sylvia Likens case. Released in 1989 as a novel and then in 2007 as a movie, the book used the Likens story as its backdrop. I have not read the book, so I can’t comment on whether its better/similar/worse than Let’s Go Play, but I have seen a number of people relate the two to having similar themes and scenes. I have also not seen the movie, so won’t comment on that either. Final Thoughts: So, let’s wrap this up. For those still here, thank you! In closing, I’m giving this book 5 stars. For me, it was an edge-of-your-seat psychological thriller that really wormed its way into my brain. It made me think about a lot of questions the book asked and the story and the characters will be with me for many moons. Johnson has created a book that has wedged itself and in turn the author into horror lore. It’ll be interesting to see what happens with this book as the years go by. Does the price of each copy continue to increase? Does someone acquire the rights and give it a grand re-release with a new hardcover, a new foreword and some essay’s from horror heavyweights about the impact the book has? It’ll be interesting to see. From the article I shared about some of Johnson’s life, it doesn’t sound like he was that liked of a family man and I can’t speculate on if his family wants to be involved with it at all. Until something new comes along with the book, horror fans will still clamour for the book and seek it out. Whether they will like the story inside will be up to each individual reader, but from my end of things – the story stood up to my expectations. Let’s Go Play At The Adams Surely, it was only a game. In the orderly, pleasant world Barbara inhabited, nice children — and they were nice children — didn’t hold an adult captive. But what Barbara didn’t count on was the heady effect their new-found freedom would have on the children. Their wealthy parents were away in Europe, and in this rural area of Maryland, the next house was easily a quarter of a mile away. The power of adults was in their hands, and they were tempted by it. They tasted it and toyed with it — their only aim was to test its limits. Each child was consumed by his own individual lust and caught up with the others in sadistic manipulation and passion, until finally, step by step, their grim game strips away the layers of childishness to reveal the vicious psyche, conceived in evil and educated in society’s sophisticated violence, that lies always within civilized men. More than a terrifying horror story, Let’s Go Play at the Adams’ is a compelling psychological exercise of brooding insights and deadly implications. Steve Stred Steve Stred is an up-and-coming Dark, Bleak Horror author. Steve is the author of the novel Invisible, the novellas Wagon Buddy, Yuri and Jane: the 816 Chronicles and two collections of short stories; Frostbitten: 12 Hymns of Misery and Left Hand Path: 13 More Tales of Black Magick, the dark poetry collection Dim the Sun and his most recent release was the coming-of-age, urban legend tale The Girl Who Hid in the Trees. On June 1st, 2019 his second full-length novel, The Stranger will be welcomed to the world. Steve is also a voracious reader, reviewing everything he reads and submitting the majority of his reviews to be featured on Kendall Reviews. Steve Stred is based in Edmonton, AB, Canada and lives with his wife, his son and their dog OJ. You can follow Steve on Twitter @stevestred You can visit Steve’s Official website here The Stranger Ahhh… nothing like the annual summer family camping trip, right? Malcolm, his wife Sam and their two kids have been staying at the same cabin, at the same campground for years now. Heck, Malcolm’s been coming to the campground since he was a kid. Miles and miles of groomed trails, hiking, kayaking on the pristine lake. What’s not to like? But this year… well this year’s different. You see, roof repairs have caused them to have to change their plans. Now they’re staying at the cabin at the end of season, in fact they’re the last campers before it closes for the winter. While happy to be spending time with the family, Malcolm feels a shift. The caretaker next door makes it known he hates him. The trees… move and dance, as though calling him, beckoning him. Then on a seemingly normal kayaking trip, the family makes a discovery. YOU TAKE FROM ME I TAKE FROM YOU Something’s out there, just on the other side of the fence. Malcolm’s positive it’s just the caretaker trying to scare him, teach the family a lesson. But what if it’s not… What if there is something out there? The Stranger is the second novel from Steve Stred and 9th release overall. The Stranger is another offering following in the footsteps of similar books Invisible, YURI and The Girl Who Hid in the Trees. As Steve describes his works; “dark, bleak horror.” With this release, Steve has decided to look deeper into what makes humans tick. He confronts two key elements of mankind; bigotry and our environmental footprint. Featuring stunning cover art by Chadwick St. John (www.inkshadows.com), The Stranger will be a story that will leave you feeling uneasy and have you looking at the trees differently. Maybe it’s not the wind making the branches sway… Maybe… It’s… The Stranger. You can buy The Stranger from Amazon UK & Amazon US Reddit and its partners use cookies and similar technologies to provide you with a better experience. By accepting all cookies, you agree to our use of cookies to deliver and maintain our services and site, improve the quality of Reddit, personalize Reddit content and advertising, and measure the effectiveness of advertising. By rejecting non-essential cookies, Reddit may still use certain cookies to ensure the proper functionality of our platform. For more information, please see our Cookie Notice and our Privacy Policy. Let’s Go Play at the Adams’ was written by Mendal W. Johnson (can’t find a Wikipedia page for him) and published in 1976. It was Johnson’s only novel – which seems a bit weird and shifty to me. Well no not really. But the book is so damned horrible, so darn twisted and fucked up (“man that is some repugnant shit!”) that it’s hard to imagine the author wasn’t a bit of a weirdo to be honest. I’ve actually owned two copies of the book. The first one I found discarded on top of a recycling bin (true story) and because it looked interesting and scary and was also in pristine condition I took it home. I was only about 14 at the time and after I started leafing through it and looking more carefully I was so disgusted by the content that I threw it away OUTSIDE IN A PUBLIC BIN. In a public bin – I was so shocked and sickened that I didn’t even want it in the house (over dramatic teenager, I know I know). As Captain Hindsight from South Park would definitely know – this was a huge mistake. It’s now pretty much impossible to buy a new copy of this book and Amazon are currently advertising second-hand publications that range from £30 for a paperback to £100 or so for a hardback. O-kay then. Wish I hadn’t been quite so hasty. Or dramatic. Because yeah, inevitably I got thinking about it as I got older. I was curious and felt I was finally hard enough to handle it (though still slept with the light on) so I found myself an old, decrepit copy for a few quid online – at least a third of the yellow pages already falling out. This (on the left) is the true cover by the way. The original, real front cover. Both the one I hastily chucked and the one I bought again had this cover. I think I like it the most (though the dark one with red writing up the top is pretty cool too). SO ANYWAY, time for the general synopsis of this mental and depraved story. A young girl (in her early 20s) called Barbara is booked to babysit for some children for a few days, whilst their parents are out of town. UNFORTUNATELY – upon arriving at their house she is chloroformed, gagged and painfully tied up. The vicious and out-of-control kids are very much in charge and from here until the end of the book Barbara is the subject of torture, humiliation and much, much, much worse – as the children go from youthful rebellion to sick curiosity to downright depraved behaviour. You can imagine. If you want to. Though it might be best not to. It has been said that the story is loosely based on the true life torture and murder of Sylvia Likens. I don’t know about that, I’m just passing on the speculation. But one thing I DO know, is the book has a very uneasy feel through-out. I think because it’s kids as the evil perpetrators it’s just that bit worse. You can tell who the ringleaders are and who’s more ‘brought along for the ride’ but they inevitably egg each other on and there’s barely any compassion at all. You really do root for poor old Barbara, willing her to escape or hoping one of her kidnappers will show some heart and free her (yeah right). Sorry to be a *SPOILER* but there aren’t any happy endings here. It is a horrific story to be frank, with the final chapter being the most haunting of all. Certainly the most evil tale I have ever read (and Take a Break or That’s Life magazines don’t count) and I’m not sure I’d be in a huge rush to read it again. Rest assured this story is not for the faint hearted or children, but I certainly recommend it to all fans of seriously horrid horror novels (wouldn’t it be great if that were a real genre?). Let’s Go Play at the Adams’ is a cruel, unsettling and disturbing book – make no mistakes about it – and I have to admit I feel a little bit like a weirdo myself even recommending it. But it’s also important to note, it’s well written and worth it for the shocks (if you like that kinda thing). I’ve had this book on my radar for ages, from back in the days when a paperback copy cost something like three million quid or something to buy! But things are different now, so I just finished my nice shiny new copy, and thought I’d share my thoughts. You’ve probably heard of this book and its cult status before, but if not, this review will have a few spoilers in it; spoilers I actually read in other reviews. So there’s my warning. I’m going to try and write this review without mentioning Jack Ketchum’s brilliant and equally hard-to-read The Girl Next Door (whoops!!). Oh well, if you want to know my thoughts on that book then, ahem! The basic plot of Let’s Go Play is five kids aged 10-17, decide to tie up the babysitter. You know, it’s something to do. What starts as an innocent (not quite the right word) little game suddenly descends into barbaric acts of torture. And things don’t end well for Barbara, said babysitter. In my opinion, age hasn’t served this book well. I’m sure back in the 70s this was some shocking shit all right, but I’ve read plenty of gross, shocking, and downright ‘Whaaaaat???’ books, making this seem a little tame. Perhaps tame isn’t entirely true, as some things in this book will be shocking until the end of humanity as we know it. I think my main gripe was that the whole thing didn’t seem that believable. I know you have to suspend your disbelief when reading fiction, but you know what I mean. And Barbara’s reactions to the methods of mistreatment seemed a bit ‘off’ and not nearly as soul-destroying as they should have been. I must qualify my stance by saying that I am not and have never been a) a woman, b) a babysitter, or c) bound by a group of kids (actually not by anyone, not even in a kinky way). Barbara has, and I’d think that someone in her position would be a bit more savage and desperate than she was. Yeah, I know she’s not that type of person, but an extreme situation would surely bring with it an extreme reaction. In particular, the part where she is raped. Again, I have now way of appreciating how utterly barbaric this is, but I’ve seen the news, watched documentaries, read books; surely she would have been more affected, especially being the kind of person she is. Instead of feeling utterly violated and used, as her virginity is savagely taken, no less; all she cares about is that she might be pregnant. Really? That’s your biggest beef? Let’s change topic. The kids eventually realise this is not going to end well. They’ve humiliated her by removing her clothes, tortured her, intimidated her, done the aforementioned thing; there’s no way they can get away with this. So they decide there’s only one way out of this; they have to kill her. Maybe police forensic departments were pretty substandard in the 70s, but surely the police would work out that their stories don’t match, they’re obviously hiding something because they’re kids and don’t seem the least bit traumatised by what happened – no kid is that good at acting! But it seems that after they frame a random dude who’s loitering in the grounds of the massive house of the murder, everyone just accepts this and asks no questions. Perhaps it’s because this dude is an immigrant and looked down upon (it was the 70s), although I’m still not so sure. The kids, to be certain of erasing all evidence that can talk, kill him, too. So that’s 2 murders and all five of them are holding it perfectly together. Really? My other main gripe was that I found some parts of the book just boring. At times I was skimming through sections and just getting the general gist of it all. Many passages just weren’t all that engaging. I’m really laying into this book here, but it’s not all bad. On the most part the writing was pretty decent, although – there were lots – of these – bloody dashes! The treatment of Barbara was, of course, pretty nasty, and the descriptions really took me into the bowels of the story. Each act of torture, or gagging, or tying, or violence, was realistic and vivid. And I did really want Barabara to escape, and for the kids to pay for their little shitted-ness. Barbara’s sanity was pushed to – and beyond – its limit as the book reached its conclusion, and I did feel her mental state rapidly diminishing as she became aware of the ultimate plan for her. And the kids’ conversations about what to do with her, all carried out in a very democratic style, did seem the behaviour of children in over their heads. Which is why I just wasn’t buying that ending. But saying all of that, this is still a book that’s a must read, if only to say you have. If you want a difficult read about torture and the depravity of the human condition (hey, who doesn’t?) I’d say check out The Girl Next Door first. Categories: book reviewTags: book review, horror, let's go play at the adams, mental w. johnson, paperbacks from hell, torture, violence edit descriptions of this character edit descriptions of this character By MARK BENEDICT A teenage boy, wielding a knife, tortures a naked young woman. She is tied to a chair, her mouth gagged. When the boy notices her pleading eyes, he feels not guilt or remorse, but annoyance. Then, in a stroke of inspiration, he solves the problem by blindfolding her. Welcome, friends, to the gruesomely sadistic world of Mendal W. Johnson’s LET’S GO PLAY AT THE ADAMS’ (1974), a vintage shocker newly reissued in mass market paperback. LET’S GO PLAY AT THE ADAMS’ is part of Valancourt’s reissue of various titles discussed in the excellent PAPERBACKS FROM HELL (2017), Grady Hendrix’s book about the paperback horror market of the ’70s and ’80s. Horror fans owe Hendrix and Valancourt a debt of gratitude for resurrecting this brutal lost classic. It’s an infamous novel. Indeed, due to scenes of youth-administered brutality and for having been so long out of print, LET’S GO PLAY has acquired an unholy contraband mystique. The reputation isn’t unjustified; the scene described above isn’t the novel’s most disturbing, or even a strong contender. The surprise, however, is that this notorious book, which depicts the worst bad behavior imaginable, is so good. Set in a rural but affluent Maryland countryside, told in fluid third-person omniscience, Johnson’s novel is an imperfect but unforgettable plunge into hell. The premise is ingeniously fiendish. Bobby and Cindy Adams, conspiring with three of their neighbor friends, drug and tie up Barbara, the Adams’ overnight summer babysitter, intending to keep her captive until their parents return from vacation. Barbara is minimally cared for by the five children; their objective, initially, is simply to do away with all adult supervision. Soon, however, John and Paul, the neighbor boys, strongly abetted by Paul’s sister Dianne, push for further victimization. Thereafter, Barbara is physically tortured and sexually abused. Fearing that she may not survive, she starts fighting back, at which point the brutality escalates even further. No doubt about it: if you like tales that warm the heart, this ain’t the book for you. The nastiness starts early and never lets up; following a prologue establishing a sense of order between the Adams children and their new babysitter, the first chapter smashes that order by opening with Barbara coming to after being drugged and tied up. The portrayal of her trapped, terrified mind is grimly heartbreaking, and the POV shift to other characters, especially to the torture-obsessed Paul, the knife wielder, or the sexually malicious John, is rarely much of a breather. These kids, all teens except ten-year-old Cindy, have highly active, deeply cruel minds. In short, the ugliness is unrelenting. And the ending! I fully expected a shocking finish, and was still freaked. But then, what else can we expect from a book whose 1980 paperback cover features the tagline “Tonight the kids are taking care of the babysitter” and a door opening onto a woman tied up in a chair? And yet, readers hoping for a fast, trashy read will be disappointed. This is an impressively serious and richly detailed work—a parable of adolescent savagery drenched in sweaty late-summer atmospherics. The kids are vividly drawn, their power dynamics keenly observed. In group scenes, such as when the coldly reasonable Dianne registers that the leadership role has shifted from John to her, LET’S GO PLAY is often startlingly perceptive. This book is smart. But also problematic. The novel’s extremeness is of course part of its distinction; it goes too far, daringly. But even so. Do we really need multiple rape scenes? Or to see Barbara, naked and traumatized, through the perspective of not one, not two, but three different teenage male gazes? It’s at least safe to say, though, that Barbara has the author’s fullest sympathy and respect; if a reader doesn’t feel and root for her, the fault is with the reader, not the author. Still, even on its own nasty, problematic terms, the novel is by no means perfect. Barbara, a twenty-year-old college student, fun and friendly, and only mildly disciplining, isn’t an especially plausible kidnapping target. Why would children, even supremely fiendish ones, sideline a cheerful housekeeper and playmate? Their initial goal, remember, is only to achieve extra freedom. Johnson tries to justify it by making it a daring extension of their outdoor army games, yet it remains a stretch. The workload to keep her imprisoned is heavy; the extra freedom is light. Not to mention that they all understand that parental punishment likely awaits. Granted, Barbara’s sheer likeability is in one way a useful choice; it makes their escalating disregard for her even creepier. Still, a bummer babysitter, slightly older, less fun and more restrictive, would have enhanced the story’s believability as well as ratcheted up its kids-versus-adults dynamic. At times, LET’S GO PLAY feels more like a musty academic thesis than a hot-blooded novel. The story is most riveting when it’s filtered directly through its characters’ anxious minds. When Johnson strays into philosophizing narrator territory, the result is sometimes effective, sometimes not. In a few key scenes, such as when the increasingly guilt-stricken Bobby argues against the group’s final plan, the author breaks the spell by digressing into a snoozy civics lesson. Adding to the academic effect is his tendency to overload paragraphs with hyphens and parentheses. But make no mistake: the hot-blooded novel absolutely wins out. By the end, the story has evolved into darkest nightmare, a fitting close for a tale about the escalating nature of evil acts. Valancourt’s new edition is a collector’s dream. The 1980 paperback cover art, which ranks among the most gloriously sinister in publishing history, has been lovingly retained, and Grady Hendrix contributes an insightful introduction. The font is small even by mass market standards, but I hardly noticed once the story took hold. Horror fans may want to score two copies: one to devour, one to preserve. The faint of heart, on the other hand, have been duly warned. Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Skip to content Here’s to another horror #allthebookreviews title in for the year! We wanted to get some of the classics read and with this being in PAPERBACKS FROM HELL by Grady Hendrix AND a cult classic, we couldn’t resist. LET’S GO PLAY AT THE ADAMS’ – Mendal W. Johnson (Originally Released in 1974) Book Description: Surely, it was only a game. In the orderly, pleasant world Barbara inhabited, nice children — and they were nice children — didn’t hold an adult captive.But what Barbara didn’t count on was the heady effect their new-found freedom would have on the children. Their wealthy parents were away in Europe, and in this rural area of Maryland, the next house was easily a quarter of a mile away. The power of adults was in their hands, and they were tempted by it. They tasted it and toyed with it — their only aim was to test its limits. Each child was consumed by his own individual lust and caught up with the others in sadistic manipulation and passion, until finally, step by step, their grim game strips away the layers of childishness to reveal the vicious psyche, conceived in evil and educated in society’s sophisticated violence, that lies always within civilized men.More than a terrifying horror story, Let’s Go Play at the Adams’ is a compelling psychological exercise of brooding insights and deadly implications. My Thoughts: 3/5 stars I think this helps solidify how truly awful babysitting can be. I’ve had a couple of horror books lately about a bad time while babysitting. I think this one takes the cake, though. I can see why this has a cult following, but wow. As someone who regularly reads and enjoys extreme horror, there were some hard parts in this. Mostly because this wasn’t about creatures or ghosts, this is about the monstrous potential in humans. I’ve seen comparisons to The Girl Next Door by Jack Ketchum, and I can 100% see why. It’s a similar kind of horror and violence in terms of the treatment Barbara falls victim to. Give kids some freedom and no adult supervision and see what happens. These kids range from ages 10 – 17, and each and every one of them is just evil. I think everyone hopes there’s SOME humanity in everybody, but that’s just not the case here. There were ample opportunities to stop the games, but no one would. I was amazed to see readers completely split on this book. Many chose to DNF, and others gave it glowing reviews. The majority seem to be right in the middle with me. Things get slow and repetitive at times, and it felt like the torture and cruelty just never stopped. I think the author did an incredible job getting into the minds of everyone involved and portrayed the ages of each of the kids well. I can see why this was so polarizing and controversial when it was released in the 70s. I am glad I got to grab a copy with the foreword by Grady Hendrix, which I highly recommend reading or checking out Paperbacks from Hell for more about the book. Apparently, people were destroying their copies or getting physically ill upon finishing the book. I think I’ll keep mine for the collection, but I think I’m in the camp where I can’t say I loved it or hated it, and I can understand the people saying they endured it. I think if you want to get a horror cult classic off the list or are truly curious about it, give it a try. While I’m glad I read it, I don’t think this will be one that I’ll revisit in the future. © 1996-2014, Amazon.com, Inc. or its affiliates © 1996-2014, Amazon.com, Inc. or its affiliates edit descriptions of this character edit descriptions of this character edit descriptions of this character edit descriptions of this character First published back in November of 1974, US author Mendal Johnson’s one and only novel ‘Let’s Go Play At The Adams’’ is a surprisingly underrated novel of psychological horror that was based on the real life murder of Sylvia Likens. DLS Synopsis:When Dr and Mrs Adams go away on holiday to Europe they leave their two children – twelve-year-old Bobby and his ten-year-old sister Cindy – behind under the care of twenty-year-0ld babysitter Barbara Miller. And so, after leaving behind their home on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, the Adams’ depart with no troubling worries at all regarding the young babysitter’s capabilities, feeling confident in leaving their children in the care of the sensible young girl. However, the following morning, Barbara wakes up in a drowsy state, in her bed at the Adams’ house with her arms and legs tied down, leaving her helpless and spread-eagled across the bed. As she slowly comes to from the chloroform that she was sedated with, she finds Bobby asleep on a chair beside her. Anger floods Barbara’s senses as she demands to be let free. But against her better judgement, Bobby point-blank refuses.When the Adams kids’ neighbourhood friends, John Randall (16), Paul McVeigh (13) and his sister Diane McVeigh (17) arrive at the Adams’ house, a new game begins for the group self-dubbed ‘The Freedom Five’. And Barbara is at the very centre of this new game.At first they don’t know quite what to do with their new captive. With no parents around, and indeed, no one at all within a half-mile radius, the Freedom Five really are left to their own devices now. And unfortunately for young Barbara – those devices were becoming exploratory, inquisitive and increasingly more sadistic.And as the days pass by, the games continue to get more and more twisted. Tied up all day long, Barbara soon loses all hope of maintaining any form of dignity. Her constant pleading is falling on deaf ears. But as Barbara Miller becomes less and less their babysitter and more their own living-breathing toy, so the horrors that they will install upon the poor girl descend to new inhumane depths.For Barbara Miller, the future is now a very uncertain thing. Hope lies with convincing the children that what they are doing is wrong. Their game has gotten out of hand and they must stop before it goes too far. But with their new-found power, the confines of compassion and social responsibility are so easily abandoned. And there’s just so much that you can do with a helpless tied-up twenty-year-old girl, when no adults are around to stop you…DLS Review:Well, I guess the first thing that needs to be pointed out is how breathtakingly nasty this psychological horror novel is. Based on the gut-wrenchingly true story of Sylvia Likens’ murder at the hands of Gertrude Baniszewski (and most importantly her children and their neighbourhood friends), Johnson’s loose adaptation of the horrendous torture which eventually led to Likens’ death purposefully utilises a vast wealth of the truly harrowing psychology that make this such a difficult story to read.US author Jack Ketchums’ own disturbing adaptation of the Likens murder in his notorious novel ‘The Girl Next Door’ (1989) details a story much closer to the true crime. Indeed, most notably in Johnson’s novel is the removal of any adult involvement, purposefully removing Baniszewski’s role from the adaptation. Ketchum’s version used the character of Ruth Chandler to portray Baniszewski, which is where the two novels deviate from each other the most.It must be said that ‘Let’s Go Play At The Adams’’ sets out as a bit of a slow-burner, cautiously setting down the characters and young Barbara Miller’s predicament to enable an unnervingly sinister atmosphere to gradually creep into the storyline. From early on the reader never knows exactly how far the Freedom Five are going to take this supposed ‘game’, and this one threatening question is a constant worry that lingers over the tale for the vast majority of its length.What the novel does, and does incredibly well, is examine the way in which the group as a whole keeps pushing the limits of the game further and further than any one of the kids would have done by themselves. It’s pack mentality at an all-time low. And my god is it frightening to see how it just escalates and spirals to maddening new lows as they collectively push the torture of young Barbara Miller along further each day.Johnson pays particular attention to really building upon the characterisation of the six individuals that make up the vast majority of the tale. Although the five young abductors have highly questionable motives behind carrying on with the disturbing and sadistic torture of the twenty-year-old babysitter, Johnson still quietly examines each of their individual personalities and psychological traits, with much still left open to the reader’s own interpretation.Written in the third-person-perspective, Johnson cleverly shifts the narration between both the viewpoint of the Freedom Five and that of their captive, Barbara. In doing so, the reader can see the unfolding and escalating horror not only from the side of someone who is utterly terrified at what is happening to her, with the constant questioning of how far they will take it, but also from the equally haunting perspective of the psychotically simplistic logic of the torturers pushing further and further with their ‘game’.As the tale progresses, we gradually see how the inquisitive innocence of the Freedom Five is slowly withered away. Before long Barbara’s captivity has become less of an excitingly rebellious game, and more of a day-to-day chore for the kids. But by now they are locked in to carrying it on, feeling that they are already too far down a road that they can no longer easily come back from.From spiralling degradation to new lows of sexual molestation and eventually on to rape, Barbara’s captivity just keeps on descending further and further into an abyss that she is beginning to realise she may never come back out of. And it’s at this chilling point-of-no-return that Johnson really starts getting inside the reader’s head.Following a horrific finale, the novel ends with one of the most emotive epilogues to possibly have ever been put to paper. It’s cold, chilling and utterly gut-wrenching. The reality of the tale hits the reader hard in the gut; the utter injustice of it all is so incredibly hard to swallow. To end a tale in such a way was certainly a brave decision, and the resulting difficulty for the reader to easily accept such an ending is evidence enough that the author’s plan worked.This is undoubtedly one of the most disturbing psychological horror novels that you are likely to come across. Its crushing impact and deliberately cold ending make it a novel that you are unlikely to ever forget. Its harrowing story will always stay with you, lurking at the back of your mind, just waiting for a small reminder to bring the terrifying memories of what happened to this poor girl flooding back.The novel runs for a total of 270 pages. © DLS Reviews © 1996-2014, Amazon.com, Inc. or its affiliates