

Fango Flashback: “PRETTY POISON”

Written by Tony Timpone

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Produced eight years after the landmark PSYCHO (see Fango Flashback [here](#)), 1968's psychological thriller PRETTY POISON almost plays, in its opening moments, like a dry run for star Anthony Perkins' later work in PSYCHO II. A disturbed young man, fresh from a long stint in a mental hospital, meets with his parole officer (SECONDS' John Randolph) to discuss his re-entry into society after serving time for some unspeakable crime.

This isn't Norman Bates, however, but one Dennis Pitt, a “reformed” arsonist who, we ultimately learn, “accidentally” set his aunt on fire years ago. A child trapped in a man's body, Pitt has an active imagination and lives in a fantasy world of his own making. He may be able to con his parole officer and the people in the quiet Massachusetts town he relocates to, but he will soon meet his match in the form of a gorgeous teenage cheerleader (Tuesday Weld, never better), who catches his eye. That's the basic setup of PRETTY POISON, which begins a special one-week engagement (with a luscious new 35mm print) at New York City's [Film Forum](#)

(209 West Houston; [212] 727-8110) from February 3-9.



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Buried upon its release by antsy distributor 20th Century Fox, PRETTY POISON has continued to garner a cult rep ever since. Perkins is wonderful as the awkward but likable Pitt, who tries to make a go of it by toiling in a paint-manufacturing plant. Then he becomes smitten with the "innocent" Sue Ann Stepanek (Weld). Pitt seduces her into his imaginary world of espionage, and Perkins is quite charming and funny in the scenes of their unusual courtship, displaying none of Norman's trademark nervous tics and stammers. But Sue Ann has her own agenda: Her mother (former B-movie starlet Beverly Garland) won't let her run around at night, so after Sue Ann shockingly murders a night watchman at Dennis' plant during their late-night "mission," she hatches a bloody plan to do away with Mom and run away with her older beau. But all is not what it seems when it comes to Sue Ann...

Adapting Stephen Geller's blandly titled novel SHE LET HIM CONTINUE, screenwriter Lorenzo Semple Jr., best known for his camp work on TV's BATMAN and such infamous feature films as 1976's KING KONG and 1980's FLASH GORDON, exhibits a subtlety and black humor with PRETTY POISON that's missing from his broad fantasy work. Despite PRETTY POISON's sunny summer setting, the film plays like classic film noir, as we witness the machinations of its erotically charged femme fatale and her ensnared antihero. The cinematic career of neophyte director Noel Black, who frequently clashed with Weld on this debut feature, never blossomed. Important critics like Pauline Kael championed PRETTY POISON, but Black got shunted to TV in the decades that followed. Paid a meager \$75,000 for the film, Perkins delivers one of his best performances (funny, sympathetic and finally tragic) in PRETTY POISON, though the actor reportedly found the film slow-moving (it's not). Beware the 1996 TV remake.