

We Need to Talk About Kevin

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue

The primary reason to immerse yourself in the jagged world of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is the towering lead performance by Tilda Swinton, an actress of continuing spontaneity who traveled a circuitous route through experimental and art cinema before embarking on a second career in the mainstream. Swinton plays Eve Khatchadourian, a successful travel writer whose life takes a sudden turn when, during a dizzying job assignment, she meets and falls in love with the jovial Franklin (John C. Reilly). Before she knows it, she is married and pregnant in New York City.

Motherhood proves to be extremely difficult for Eve. As she deals with the nonstop crying and screaming of the infant years, she starts to wonder why she made the decision to give birth. These uncertainties turn to confusion and resentment when her son, Kevin, proves to be the toddler from hell, an angry and defiant boy whose sole desire appears to be making Eve's life miserable. (Of course, Kevin is all smiles and giggles around Franklin, which makes Eve look like a weak-kneed whiner.) As the years pass, the situation worsens—despite Eve's attempts to make things work—until we realize that Kevin's problems are anything but garden variety.

The film—cowritten and directed by Lynne Ramsay and based on the best-selling novel by Lionel Shriver—is intended to draw an emotional and psychological correlation between Eve's reluctance and regret at becoming a mother and Kevin's worsening behavior. It tries to be a story of punishment and guilt, and not just a cautionary tale about the difficulties of parenting.

But without the arch and revealing language of the novel, which is written as a series of letters that Eve sends Franklin, all we are left with is the horror-story plotline, which is pockmarked with holes from the very beginning. Why doesn't Eve get some help with Kevin? Why doesn't she sit down with Franklin and discuss options? Once Kevin becomes violent and dangerous, especially to his younger sister (whose birth seems to be Eve's attempt at redemption), why isn't he taken to doctors or therapists? The film tries to work around these obvious story problems by relating the tale through a complex web of flashbacks, many of them hallucinatory,

but no amount of saturated lighting or time manipulation can change the fact that the story doesn't make sense.

As a result, instead of a nuanced study about the terrifying relationship between an ambivalent parent and a difficult child, we get the latest installment of *The Omen*. And not even Swinton's superlative acting can help with that.