

Carnage

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

Carnage plays out entirely in a New York City apartment, where two couples are trying to deal with a playground incident involving their 11-year-old sons, one of whom struck the other in the mouth with a stick. In the process, the film—directed and coscripted by Roman Polanski, based on Yasmina Reza's play *God of Carnage*—peels back the skin of each supposedly caring parent, revealing the person beneath the civilized facade.

Most interesting is Penelope (Jodie Foster), whose compassion for the victims in Darfur seems to mask a seething resentment at what life has dealt her, which includes marriage to a boorish salesman, Michael (John C. Reilly), who Penelope says is constantly "mitigating" situations instead of confronting them. They must contend with the wealthier and more successful Alan (Christoph Waltz), an attorney who spends most of the film on his cell phone talking business, and Nancy (Kate Winslet), an edgy investment banker whose vomiting all over Penelope's rare art books signals a shift in the film's dynamic.

One-location films are catnip to ambitious actors who get a chance to wrestle with juicy dialogue, unexpected revelations and the occasional explosion of anger. And this A-list cast makes the most of these moments. But at a very snappy 79 minutes, the film seems adrift in terms of tone. *Carnage* works best as a comedy, albeit a cruel one, but the film's reliance on the humor and absurdity of the situation makes Alan's third-act speech about his belief in a "god of carnage" hollow and contrived. It's almost as if the film were trying to have it both ways: be both a mocking indictment and a probing psychological study. As a result, it never manages to be either one.