For horror fans, *Deadly Friend* is a film that seems to have everything going for it. It’s a modern-day reimagining of Mary Shelley’s classic novel *Frankenstein*, directed by *A Nightmare on Elm Street* creator Wes Craven, written by Bruce Joel Rubin (the future Oscar-winner behind *Ghost* and *Jacob’s Ladder*), and starring Kristy Swanson (the original Buffy the Vampire Slayer). But while the film has its admirers, it was a critical and commercial failure in 1986, quickly disowned by its creators and leaving viewers to wonder what went wrong.

Although nearly every early reviewer seemed impressed (many in spite of themselves) by the audacity of the film’s infamous death-by-basketball scene, all of them wished for a different movie. Absent any knowledge of the film’s production, most critics blamed the director for its shortcomings. *Variety*’s Joe Leydon and *Hollywood Reporter*’s Henry Sheehan accused Craven of unoriginality, citing dream sequences and “a fire-ravaged boogeyman” that looked like reheated leftovers from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Others insisted that the film was a rip-off of everything from *E.T.* and *Short Circuit* to *Re-Animator* and *The Fly*. Bruce Westbrook of *The Houston Chronicle* and Marylynn Uricchio of *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* were a bit more insightful, speculating about the schizophrenic tone of the film, which begins as a dark-but-sweet love story and abruptly turns into balls-to-the-wall gore fest. Uricchio viewed the lighter sequences in the film as a testament to “the genuine talent [Craven] may be suppressing.” Westbrook commended the horror director’s
ambition to tell a more nuanced story, but concluded, “It’s a goal he hasn’t achieved yet in a workable whole.” Desmond Ryan of The Philadelphia Inquirer summed up: “Craven’s film is a modest pleasantry until he remembers who he is [...] Developments thereafter are predictable and of the sort that customers expect from a director who clearly doesn’t wish to depart too drastically from the Craven image.”

Unlike Craven’s other films, Deadly Friend has not been a subject of adoring retrospectives, nor has it received the special edition DVD treatment. There have been no commentaries, no deleted scenes, and no in-depth attempts to analyze the creative process that produced this unwieldy monster. Perhaps that’s because Craven himself has been reluctant to talk about the film, quietly noting that the year of making Deadly Friend was one of the most troubling years of his life. In an episode of the AFI series The Directors, he recalls 1986 as the year of a failed marriage, a major lawsuit, and his removal from two major studio projects (Beetlejuice and Superman IV) that might have led to the more mainstream success he has always sought. Glibly noting that Deadly Friend—his first film for a major studio—had “about 20 producers that all had different opinions,” he concludes, “I’m amazed that anything came out of that film—that it’s watchable whatsoever.”

Over the years screenwriter Bruce Joel Rubin has also been relatively dismissive of the finished film, although he acknowledges the project as a major turning point in his life. At the time he was approached to write Deadly Friend, Rubin’s Hollywood career was based entirely on a “story by” credit for the brilliant-but-troubled 1983 film Brainstorm. He had recently moved his family from Indiana to Los Angeles on the advice of friend Brian DePalma, but he had no job prospects. All he had was a spec screenplay called Jacob’s Ladder, which was being hailed by industry insiders as one of the best unproduced screenplays in recent memory. That’s what prompted Craven and producer Robert M. Sherman to approach him about adapting Diana Henstell’s novel Friend.

Rubin remembers: “Bob Sherman sent me the book. I read it and I thought to myself, I can’t do that. I have integrity. I didn’t come to Hollywood to write horror films. And I was going to call him the next morning and say that I couldn’t do it. In the morning, about 7am, I got up and I was meditating... and feeling very smug about turning it down. As I was sitting there, I heard the voice of [my deceased meditation teacher] Rudi in my head, as clear as could be. He said to me, out of the ether, ‘Schmuck! There’s more integrity in providing for your family than in turning down jobs.’ Then he said, ‘Get up right now, go to the phone, call the producer and say you’re going to do it.’ It’s not often that I get a call from beyond the grave, so I did exactly what he said.”

Rubin goes on to say that the job turned out to be “a lifesaver on many levels.” It rescued him financially and kick-started his career in Hollywood. A few years later, following the success of Ghost and Jacob’s Ladder, he had become one of Hollywood’s most sought-after screenwriters. Although he remembers the making of Deadly Friend as “a wonderful experience,” and praises the people he worked with on the film (particularly Wes Craven), he has rarely looked back.

Recently, Bruce kindly granted me access to multiple drafts of his screenplay for Deadly Friend, which had been hidden away in a closet for nearly three decades. That allowed me a better understanding of the creative process that turned Diana
Henstell’s novel into the cinematic equivalent of Frankenstein’s monster: a film with a surprisingly big heart, a rather small brain... and plenty of guts. The development of this particular film was not so different from most Hollywood projects. Despite what many viewers and reviewers may assume, filmmaking is an intensely collaborative art and no one person ever has complete control of the story. Not the director. Not the producer. Certainly not the writer. In some cases a test audience will actually have more control than anyone! In this particular instance, the haphazard combination of several minds created a whole that was remarkably less than the sum of its parts.

The following is a kind of autopsy.

FIRST LIFE ("FRIEND")

Kristy Swanson, Matthew Laborteaux and “BeeBee” in a deleted scene from Deadly Friend

*Deadly Friend* began its life as a popular novel by Diana Henstell, simply called *Friend*. The story revolves around an emotionally disturbed 13-year-old boy named Paul “Piggy” Conway. Piggy is cursed with a lack of social grace, troubled over his parents’ recent divorce, and haunted by daydreams and nightmares about a violent “accident” that resulted in the fiery death of a classmate. For a while his only friend is a robot named BeeBee, which Piggy built himself. That changes when he and his mother move to a small town in Pennsylvania and Piggy befriends Samantha Pringle, the 11-year-old girl next door.

Sam and Piggy have an instant connection because they are both essentially adults trapped in children’s bodies. Piggy has an elevated IQ that separates him
from his peers. Samantha’s father Harry treats her more like a wife than a daughter, forcing her to cook and clean for him, right up until the moment when he murders her in a drunken rage. After her death, Piggy uses his advanced knowledge of robots and biochemistry to transplant BeeBee’s “brain” into the Samantha’s body. Henstell, obviously aware that she’s treading on familiar ground, crafts this plot twist as an homage to Frankenstein: Sam’s resurrection takes place in a science lab on a dark and stormy night, and a bolt of lightning brings her back to life.

Like Mary Shelley’s famous monster, however, Sam doesn’t come back all the way. At first she can’t walk, and she never re-learns how to talk. The only thing she does really well is kill. She strangles her father in the basement of her childhood home, drowns neighbor Elvira Williams in the bathtub, and inadvertently causes the death of a local police deputy. Regardless, Piggy loves her. He refuses to acknowledge that he has created a monster until Sam attacks his parents, and even then he can’t let her go. Piggy finally chases his creation out into a wicked snowstorm (like a certain famous baron), and the story ends on a tragic note when Sam jumps into an icy river, and Piggy follows her down into darkness.

The author says she knew from the start that Friend was going to be a tragedy, because the entire story came to her in a remarkable way. Henstell, a former publishing executive who already had one supernatural novel (The Other Side) under her belt, remembers: “I lived on the Upper West Side of New York and I was walking down Broadway one day. I walked through a construction tunnel and I heard Piggy whispering in my ear. He said, ‘My name is Piggy, and I really am real, you know.’ And I turned around, went home, called my agent and just spilled out the whole plot. I knew the whole story. It was in my head.” Realizing that this anecdote sounds like a carefully constructed publicity spiel—as a former Vice President of the Times Mirror Company and Editor-in-Chief of New American Library, she knows the drill—Henstell adds, “I swear this is absolutely true. Obviously I’ve got a good imagination... but this is true.”

The heart of the story, in the author’s mind, was Piggy’s bond with Sam. Both children have suffered tragedy—Piggy’s is in the past, Sam’s is ongoing—and that is what brings them so close. When Sam returns from the dead as a violent monster, Piggy still loves her because he can understand why she is a violent monster. Henstell reflects: “There are two kinds of people, I think, who have suffered violence to the degree that Sam has. One becomes an advocate for change, and enters a monastery or a convent or does work in Africa or something like that. And the other kind becomes a serial killer. Nobody comes out of that kind of childhood unchanged or untouched. And I pushed that to the limit. When Sam comes back, she no longer has any moral bearings. She’s not the advocate or the nun. She went the other way.”

Piggy also passes a moral point of no return, by concealing his murderous creation. Once he does, he knows he is doomed. Reflecting on the character’s subsequent solitude, Henstell says, “The thing that comes back to haunt me whenever my mind skips to it—which is rarely, but it does happen—is the scene where Piggy is in the attic with Sam. He’s in the rocker and he is thinking, I’m only 11 and I already know more people dead than alive. That was true of so many people of the generation that came before me. Kids had suffered through the Holocaust and World War II. There were so many kids that really did not know anybody alive.
They knew more people dead. That was really a touchstone to me. Piggy had that in common with those people.”

The author remembers that there was much discussion with her agent and her editor over the novel’s bleak ending, but she says she never seriously considered altering it. Once Friend was published, she felt relieved to have conveyed Piggy’s story exactly as it was conveyed to her. And everyone fell in love with the story, she says: “My friends were all in the [publishing] industry. They were all crazy about it. There just was something magical about it. I don’t even know how I came to write it, really.”

Then Hollywood came calling. Henstell remembers, “I did not want to write the movie script. Until I saw the movie....”

SECOND LIFE (“A.I.”)

Matthew Laborteaux and Kristy Swanson in a deleted scene from Deadly Friend

Bruce Joel Rubin submitted his initial story treatment—titled “A.I.”—to Warner Brothers in May 1985, followed by a first draft screenplay on July 19. His changes to the story reflected a wealth of independent research on child prodigies and autonomous robots. These were popular topics in the summer of 1985, inspiring films like D.A.R.Y.L., Explorers, Weird Science, Real Genius and My Science Project—so it was only natural for the writer to emphasize these elements. Accordingly, Paul Conway is no longer simply an advanced science student; he is now a boy genius who is being courted by the most prestigious universities. More to
the point: He’s no longer a chubby nerd with “peer problems” and a dark past, but a well-adjusted “handsome boy with strong features” and a bright future. (Accordingly, the nickname “Piggy” disappears in this draft.) BeeBee no longer symbolizes his creator’s isolation from human contact so much as his intelligence. That said, BeeBee is much more than a symbol in the film. He is the robotic equivalent of E.T. or Gizmo, and thus the first act of “A.I.” is more of a lighthearted “boy and his pet” movie than a modern-day variation on the Frankenstein myth.

Rubin reflects on the comparison to *E.T.* (1982) and *Gremlins* (1984): “That’s more of what I was aiming at. And Wes was on board with that. I didn’t like a lot of the tropes in the novel. My instinct was to get away from the [Frankenstein] clichés, and Bob and Wes liked that I had a different take on the story. None of that would have gone forward without Wes’s blessing. My impression at that point was that he was trying to get out of the horror genre. He wanted to make something that had more basis in character and the sort of emotional underpinnings that he had not had in his other films.”

In subsequent drafts, there is greater focus on developing Sam and BeeBee as complex characters. One scene that didn’t make it into the final film is a poignant dialogue scene between Paul and Sam in which they discuss their absent parents. Paul has come to terms with his father’s absence, but Sam continues to express hatred and rage toward the mother who abandoned her and the father who abuses her. In the novel Paul can relate to Sam’s pain from personal experience, but in the script he responds more like a mature advisor, diagnosing her repressed anger as battered child syndrome. Sam is the tortured one. The scene highlights an important aspect of her character, and helps to explain the motivations of the resurrected Sam later in the film in much the way that novelist Diana Henstell understands them: Sam is already predisposed to become a monster.

Elsewhere in the script, Rubin emphasizes BeeBee’s boldness when it encounters the curmudgeonly neighbor Elvira Williams. After the old lady pulls a shotgun on him, BeeBee appears reluctant to leave her property. Later, in a departure from the novel, Elvira punishes the robot’s boldness by blasting him with the shotgun. The script thus sets up the idea that, while Sam has the motivation to kill her father, BeeBee is the one with the motivation to kill Elvira. The establishment of this dichotomy—two vengeful minds in one resurrected body—suggests a new narrative problem to be solved: Which monster will become dominant in the end, Sam or BeeBee?

The final shooting script, submitted in December 1985, includes a poignant new scene near the beginning of the final act, in which the resurrected Sam finds a photo of herself with Paul and BeeBee. She sheds a single tear that suggests hope for the survival of her humanity, and Paul embraces her—a reaction that is appropriate only because undead-Sam still looks like the beautiful girl he fell in love with, as opposed to the rotting corpse in the novel. In an effort to highlight the love story, Rubin has avoided the more overtly horrific details of the novel, including a gruesome sequence where Paul sees that rats have been gnawing on his dead girlfriend’s toes, as well as a subsequent bathtub sequence that could have been perversely erotic. In spite of its new title *Deadly Friend*, the tone of the shooting script is sweet rather than twisted, more fantastic than gothic. Rubin remembers
that Lucy Fisher, then Vice President of Warner Brothers, actually called him one morning to say that his script made her cry.” “I had to ask her which script,” he reflects, “because I couldn’t believe it was Deadly Friend. She was really moved by the story. So at one point, it really had a bit of heart and an emotional life that was compelling.”

That was the goal, according to nearly everyone involved in principal photography on the film, which took place in January and February of 1986. In an on-set interview with Starlog journalist Lee Goldberg, Rubin claimed: “Deadly Friend is an unexpectedly tender movie. It’s really a story about romantic obsession and the length to which someone might go to be with the person he loves.” Actor Matthew Laborteaux, who played the role of Paul Conway, conveyed a similar message: “Wes said the one thing he didn’t want to do was make a horror movie. […] That gave me a little sense of security knowing he wanted to do a nice picture.” According to Fangoria journalist Marc Shapiro, Kristy Swanson reported that the director initially compared the project to John Carpenter’s romantic fantasy Starman (1983), telling her that “what he wanted to do with Deadly Friend was similar in tone to that film.”

Toward the end of principal photography, however, Craven was feeling less certain about that “nice” vision. As he explained to Lee Goldberg, “About five weeks into the shoot, [the producers] realized who I was and told me not to be inhibited by what they had told me in the past. In a way, I had held back.” No doubt the studio brass was responding to the commercial success of A Nightmare on Elm Street, which had been released in November and was rapidly gaining a huge cult following. Although he had spent the previous year angling for more mainstream projects, Craven himself could not help but be wowed by the amazing appeal of his own “experiment in fantasy-terror.” Freddy Krueger was a monster hit, and suddenly Friend became a bit deadlier.

With one week left in the shoot, Craven added a dream-within-a-dream sequence that could have come straight out of Elm Street. Not that he was the only one who saw the potential for such gimmickry. In the novel, Paul dreams that a skeletal, Harley-riding Elvira is chasing him, and then wakes up to a vision of a demon-eyed BeeBee in his bedroom. In Rubin’s screenplay, Paul dreams that Sam is standing by his bedside, covered in blood. Then he wakes up and learns about Elvira’s murder. Rubin apparently dismissed the former dream sequence, and Craven dismissed the latter in his notes on the first draft, saying, “The nightmare didn’t work for me. Maybe some other image. I have nothing, as you know, against nightmares in general.” Craven’s new nightmare shows Paul waking up to the sight of Harry Pringle’s scorched, decapitated head, which cackles at him Freddy Krueger-style. The director probably only intended this as a sly nod to his previous film, but it soon became much more than that.

THIRD LIFE (“DEADLY FRIEND”)
In a 1992 interview with Stanley Wiater, Wes Craven explained that the theatrical cut of *Deadly Friend* was largely the result of a single test screening: “They got in a heavy metal, hard-core audience who had been told they were going to see a ‘Wes Craven Film.’ So this horror audience was totally pissed off that they’re weren’t more blood and guts in it, and the studio did a 180-degree turn at the last moment, after the film was done.” The big hit of the test screening, apparently, was the last-minute nightmare sequence—so the studio decided that they needed to beef up their film with more of the same. On set during the pickup shoot, Craven told Lee Goldberg, “I used to say this was a love story with a twist, but Warner Bros. wants me to be sure everyone knows it’s a Wes Craven movie, and it really is, right down to the nightmare sequences.” Only someone familiar with the original shooting script would have known to ask a follow-up question: “What nightmare sequences?”

Based on a comparison of Bruce Rubin’s shooting script and the finished film, the pickup shoot encompassed revisions to the two main murder set pieces, and at least four completely new scare scenes: a new beginning, a new ending, and two new nightmares. The opening scene, in which BeeBee stops a purse thief, operates mostly as a pre-credit teaser, and is obviously intended to suggest how dangerous BeeBee could become if/when he turns violent.

The second addition is a nightmare sequence in which Sam’s father sneaks into her bedroom, presumably to molest her. In terms of sheer dread, this is perhaps the most powerful scene in the finished film. It suggests a level of parental abuse that is not even hinted at in the novel, and Richard Marcus’s leering, bug-eyed performance is genuinely unnerving. His Freddy Krueger impression climaxes with
an absurdly horrific bit of sexual innuendo. After Sam stabs him with a broken flower vase, Harry's blood spurts out through the glass tube, covering his daughter and her bed.

Harry’s death scene includes another big change. In the book, Sam strangles her father in the furnace room. In the shooting script, she comes at him with arms outstretched like Frankenstein’s Monster. The actual murder is left to the viewer’s imagination, but Paul later finds his body with the head stuck in the furnace. In his script notes, Wes Craven suggested this comparatively bloodless murder scenario, but the scene in the film plays out like a variation on Craven’s other tale of a badly burned “bad dad.” That was, after all, what the test audience demanded.

The murder of Elvira Williams offered even more gore for the bloodhounds. In the novel, Sam drowns Elvira in her bathtub. In Rubin’s early drafts, she electrocutes her. In the shooting script, Sam shoves the old woman’s head through a door. Several shots from this version appear in the original theatrical trailer for *Deadly Friend*, but in the final film Sam decimates Elvira’s head by hurling a basketball at it! Rubin remembers, “It was so over-the-top, no one could believe they were actually seeing what they were seeing on the screen. It was almost orgasmic for people given to such onscreen horror. The young boys in the theater were literally standing on the seats and cheering at the screen.”

Finally, the ending of the film was overhauled completely. Instead of the scripted confrontation in Paul’s living room, Sam’s last hurrah begins with her leaping out of a window to attack one of the supporting characters. As in the novel, she comes to her senses and runs away. After tangling with a local biker (a minor character added to an early draft of the script to appease Warner Bros. president Mark Canton), she rushes a cop and gets gunned down. In the shooting script, her last act is an attempt to protect Paul. In the film, her final act is more difficult to understand. Is she attacking the cop or committing suicide by cop? Even the filmmaker doesn’t seem to know.

The coda is even more perplexing. From day one, everyone in Hollywood seemed to understand that Sam/BeeBee couldn’t really be dead at the end of the film. Bruce Joel Rubin initially proposed an ending in which Sam escapes from the morgue, only to be picked up by a hitchhiker who screams when he gets a good look at her. In a subsequent draft, she appears in Paul’s bedroom at night. A dreamy image of undead Sam wearing a white dress on the cover of the Twisted Terror DVD release suggests that this scene was actually shot. The final film, however, jettisons these ideas… along with any attempt at logic. Paul sneaks into the morgue to retrieve Sam’s body, and witnesses an evil version of BeeBee emerging from her body like an insect from a cocoon. The only way to explain the scene is to dismiss it as another bad dream. But don’t blame Wes Craven. In a 1990 interview with *Fangoria* journalist Daniel Schweiger, Bruce Rubin explained: “That robot coming out of the girl’s head belongs solely to Mark Canton, and you don’t tell the president of Warner Bros. that his idea stinks!”

At the end of the day, the Frankensteining of so many visions into one film produced an unwieldy monster that bore little resemblance to Diana Henstell’s novel. The author remembers seeing the film for the first time at a private screening on the Warner Brothers lot: “I went with my two kids and my agent. As the lights
are coming up, my son’s voice comes out of the darkness and he says, ‘Well, that wasn’t scary.’ And that was more or less all there was to say.” As far as she was concerned, *Deadly Friend* was stillborn.

**AFTERLIFE?**

Kristy Swanson and Matthew Laborteaux in a deleted scene from *Deadly Friend*

Nearly thirty years after *Deadly Friend* was released in theaters, the film has been forgotten by most. Those who appreciate it generally seem to admire specific parts—the over-the-top nightmare sequences or the all-too-brief glimpses of a buried love story—rather than the whole. Among the horror crowd, however, there are a few die-hard fans that have called for Warner Brothers to release the “director’s cut”—the version of the film that was screened for test audiences in the summer of 1986. Bruce Rubin fondly remembers that this version “did have a kind of emotional underpinning that got decimated by the next cut.”

Avoiding the gory set pieces that make the theatrical cut seem so schizophrenic, this early version probably included quite a few additional character-based scenes that appear in the shooting script. Some examples include the tender scene where Paul and Sam talk about their missing parents, a scene where Paul waits by Sam’s hospital bedside, a scene where Paul’s mother tries to console him after Sam’s death, a montage showing undead Sam’s feeble attempts to re-learn how to walk and talk, and a scene near the end of the film in which Paul tells Sam that they have to run away together. Many more scenes were presumably excised to
produce the theatrical cut, but these scenes in particular would have strengthened the tragic love story at the heart of the film. Official Warner Brothers publicity stills, as well as French and Spanish lobby cards for the film, testify that all of this footage (and more) exists... or, at least, existed at one time. For the moment, however, Warner Brothers has no plans to restore the scenes or release the director’s cut.

In 2010, a journalist for the website Moviehole.net claimed that a Deadly Friend remake was in development at Warners. All the usual horror outlets picked up the story, but additional news was not forthcoming. Diana Henstell says she is not aware of any new attempts to revive the story, although she wouldn’t mind. The film, she says, “missed the major point of the book. I wrote a book about a little kid with problems. He’s chubby, he doesn’t have any friends, and he’s done this horrible thing. Sam was all he had, and she was taken away. That’s why he does what he does. If Piggy had been a handsome teenager with friends, there wouldn’t have been a book. I think when they decided to use that actor [Matthew Laborteaux], they threw the rest of it away. That guy could have gone out and found twenty other girls. So why would he do this? What is he, crazy?” Continuing the line of thought, she speculates hopefully about future possibilities: “At the time, I was told that nobody would go see a movie about a funny-looking little kid. If the movie got made today, the idea of having an unattractive main character—one who’s tortured and does things that are unacceptable, but with whom you still feel a connection and some empathy—would be acceptable.”

Potentially, a remake could not only re-introduce Henstell’s character, but also incorporate the worthwhile contributions of Bruce Joel Rubin and Wes Craven. To emphasize the emotions and motivations of the characters, the filmmakers might resurrect key scenes from earlier drafts of the script—a poignant funeral for BeeBee that strengthens the bond between Paul and Sam, a pivotal moment when Paul heatedly lashes out at Harry Pringle after learning of Sam’s death, an extended conversation between Paul and his mentor Dr. Johanson that addresses the moral implications of Paul’s experiment, and a later scene in which Paul expresses guilt and remorse over what he has done, only to realize that his love for Sam outweighs everything else.

Craven’s nightmare sequences could also be integrated into the revised story in a much more holistic way. In the novel Piggy suffers from repeated hallucinations, illustrating his tenuous grasp on reality. As a reader, I wondered if he might be suffering from schizophrenia—and if the resurrection of Sam might be a comprehensive delusion, prompting him to commit acts of murder then cast the blame on his dead(ly) friend. Craven, of course, has a talent for making viewers question what’s real and what isn’t. His Nightmare on Elm Street style would seem ideally suited for a film about a character that might or might not be delusional. Perhaps then we’d get to meet the “real” Piggy.

Diana Henstell would like nothing more. “To me,” she says, “Piggy was so engaging. All the things that he wasn’t in the movie made him real to me. I can talk about him almost as if I didn’t create him, as if he really did talk in my ear and he is out there somewhere, in that timeless zone where all the characters ever written about and all the characters to be written about live. And I would really love a movie that does right by him. I feel like I owe that to him... Because I let him get
shanghaied by those evil Hollywood people." She laughs, because she’s smart enough to know that she’s spouting a cliché. Then she lapses into hopeful silence for the resurrection of her old friend.