The disappearance of teenager Carolyn Harper (Raven Whitley) begins the story of outsiders and cliques, of love and lust, of loneliness and perversions. Jennifer Reeder’s *Knives and Skin* (2019) has the presence of an original and quirky film whose shades of black humour will likely polarise its audience.

As the small-town community in rural Illinois is traumatised by Carolyn’s disappearance (Fig. 1), secrets are exposed that threaten relationships. While some bonds are formed, others are broken. Adolescents and adults alike confront their own mistakes. The fallibility of family, and how the desires and dreams of adulthood are shrouded in doubt rather than in the hope of adolescence, is revealed.

An overarching sadness and a whisper of pain or longing is expressed through music as the camera follows the teenagers and adults, and catches moments of still, contemplative angst. Or perhaps the high school setting and the broken family dynamics inform the struggle to have and to hold onto that aspirational life that exists only in the imagination. In Reeder’s mind, the coming-of-age experience is not an exclusively adolescent one, but a repetitive experience of ongoing metaphorical deaths throughout adulthood. Similar to Ted Kotcheff’s *Wake in Fright* (1971), *Knives and Skin* functions as a human horror that exists both inside and outside of genre cinema. By tapping into the uncertainty and angst of living, it stretches our comprehension of anxiety in the context of genre.

Though her film work consists of what she says is now more than forty short films, *Knives and Skin* is Reeder’s feature directorial debut. Following the August 2019 UK premiere at FrightFest in London, the filmmaker (Fig. 2) discussed with *MSJ* the difficulty of changing the culture of how we think about short films. She expressed her belief in young people and also reflected on her desire to express reality, the way we compartmentalise our lives and the “horror of the everyday.”

**PR:** Why filmmaking as a means of creative expression? Was there an inspirational or defining moment for you personally?

**JR:** From the time I was quite young I was a ballet dancer, which is not that dissimilar from the provenance of Maya...
Deren, a very famous experimental filmmaker. I entered university and thought I could perhaps take an art class - I felt that I had artful friends, I was a creative misfit, and I knew I wasn’t going to be a professional dancer for a living, which is a hard life. So I took a sculpture class in my freshman year and I did horribly; I barely passed the class. My professor at that time said, “I know that you’re a dancer and there’s a woman, a visiting faculty person coming to teach a performance art course next semester - perhaps that could be something interesting to you. You’re a dancer, maybe it’s an interesting segue to something else?” So I took that class and we’d do these performances, but more so than that, it was imperative that we would document the performances by videotaping them. And that moment was truly like recovering a phantom limb.

It was a performance class, meaning that I was in front of and also behind the camera, and that felt like a beautiful synthesis: being able to use what I knew as a dancer to think about the video, or the film frame in relation to the stage of the proscenium, and this movement through the frame that could be poetic or lyrical. So that was it for me, and the next semester I started taking film classes. But again, it was film classes within an art school context, and so it wasn’t just directing track or lighting track, I could develop my own stories and ideas.

For a long time, I was in front of and behind the camera, and I did all my own editing - it was like a little sweatshop. It was a very specific and defining moment by literally picking up a camera and realising that I could invent the full world again, and I could invent my own image, and I could tell whatever story I wanted to tell. I feel that telling those stories in an art school context, there were no rules, for better or worse on some level.

I was heavily influenced by a lot of very experimental work in the beginning and eventually I did see all of these beautiful films by Maya Deren. They were coming out of dance and surreal film history; they allowed me to have a firm base in a very innovative way to tell stories. I’ve never done anything since, so I really hope this filmmaking thing works out because I can’t do anything else [laughs].

**PR:** Unlike literature that has the short story, novella and novel, cinema has been unable to embrace the short form commercially, as well as the perception of it as something less than a feature film. In my opinion, this compromises storytelling in film because there are all too often feature films that would be more effective as short films, and this prevents filmmakers from fully expressing themselves, and by consequence cinema.

**JR:** Speaking of short films, I have made something like forty short films, and even more than that. Some of those lived in galleries and museums as installation-based work, and I became exhausted by that because there’s no money in it. Also, there’s not an audience because people go to a museum to look at a painting, they don’t go to see a short film. But then I have made a lot of short narrative films and they have done quite well. They have gone to Sundance, Berlin, The London Film Festival, Rotterdam, and you go on and on.

I completely agree, and with your comparison to literature, there’s not only short stories and novellas, but there’s poetry. There’s not so many people making a living doing poetry, but we understand that poetry exists as a very serious form of writing - visually that comparison just doesn’t translate to filmmaking. Overseas in the UK and certainly in Europe there are opportunities - let’s say film festivals devoted to short films, far more than in the U.S. ARTE or ZBF will broadcast or purchase short films, and none of that exists in the United States.

There are always these questions I get like, “Why haven’t you made more feature length films?” I feel like there are multiple answers. Feature length films are expensive, they take a long time to make, and I am totally willing to acknowledge that a lot of my ideas should only be a short film, as opposed to lots of other people that have these ideas and make into feature length films. And I am with you, I think: ‘God, that could have been an awesome ten-minute film, but did it have to be a 90-minute film?’ So there’s that, and it’s something that is market or ego driven, especially in the States that if you make a short, it’s only a calling card for a feature length film.
I run into so many people that have been waiting ten years to make a feature length film and they’ve done nothing with it, which is so frustrating. I have way more ideas than I have the time and energy to make. I have an idea and I can then make something inexpensively. I may have done enough right now that I have some nice sponsorship from camera companies, and I can call Canon and say, “I have this idea; I want to shoot the film tomorrow, and it’s only a one-day shoot.” I have a small amount of money to pay people, maybe it’s only a thousand dollars, but I can make a thousand dollars look like it’s a ten-thousand-dollar short film, and then those films have a life at film festivals (Fig. 3). They’ve won prizes and it makes enough money to make another short film.

When I set out to make *Knives and Skin*, what I had under my belt were a bunch of short films that had been vetted through a lot of great film festivals, and I’d experimented with the visual things that are in *Knives and Skin*, including some of the glowing objects, the singing and the deadpan dialogue, etcetera. The producers basically said, “Make the film that you want to make; we’ll find the money”, and that’s what I did.

I couldn’t have done that if I was someone who had made one short film that had done sort of okay. But I don’t know how to change that culture of how we think about short films. Right now, maybe because of episodic or limited editions series, then there are filmmakers or storytellers given an opportunity to make these shorter form things. But it still has to be a series, it’s still not a one off let’s say, it’s not a ten-minute film. So I don’t know, but I always encourage people to make lots of short films, make the ideas that you have and figure out through the short form.

**PR: It’s a commitment to make a film, requiring you to give up a period of your life, that requires everyone to believe in it if the audience are to do so. What was the genesis of the film and what compelled you to believe in this film and decide to tell this story at this particular point in time?**

**JR:** The story itself sparked from a visual moment and it was mildly autobiographical. I had this idea of three very misfit girls, let’s say: gothy punky girls walking along a rural chilling road, maybe on their way to school. Part of that comes from living in Chicago. I grew up in Ohio and I drive to see my mother, and those roads are long and flat with just fields and the sky. I love the vastness of this flatness and occasionally you’ll see someone walking...
along the road, and so I had this idea that I want to see these three misfit girls who are living in a small town, and they have to walk to school because socio-economics only allow for one car in the family, and they’re maybe not old enough to drive. The story began to spiral out from there and I don’t write in a linear way when I’m just thinking about it. I start with this thing that’s very visual and I thought: ‘Who are these three girls? How do they know each other? What are their families like? What is about to happen to them that will make the next week of their life extraordinary?’ I believe that in a film or in literature, or in a song, there has to be something that says: “This moment is extraordinary.” And there’s absolutely a scene in Knives and Skin where these three misfit girls are walking down this gravel road, just talking about life and band practice, and this missing girl.

So that scene made it into the final cut, but I also get invested in the characters, in their stories, and I worked out some characters in other films. There were some moments of dialogue I actually completely pasted, or stole from myself - some lines of dialogue from characters that were very similar, and I felt I didn’t need to rewrite it because it’s actually a great exchange of dialogue in the short film that not many people saw, who will see this film. Knives and Skin has not ruined any of the films for someone. You can still watch the short films and learn much more about those other characters. They’re very different stories, but for me there feels a very clear trajectory from the very first film I made when I picked up a camera, to what I’m doing right now. But I always start with something that feels visual and not what would happen if a girl went missing.

**PR:** The expectation is that the film will centre around the disappearance of Carolyn Harper, and a traditional narrative would seek to unravel that mystery. It remains the core that the ensemble cast of characters orbit, but Knives and Skin is an exercise in insinuating a main character and narrative, and then making it into something more that. This is truer to life’s uncertain and untidy narrative, and the film will appeal to those that appreciate this mix of honesty with the unexpected.

**JR:** Real life goes on even if something enormous is happening very far away from you, which we’re dealing with on a constant basis. You turn on the news and there has been a bombing, there are these tragedies, and you could sit and contemplate it for a moment, but then you’re: ‘Okay, I’ve got to go to work.’ And honestly, it’s also the case if something is impacting you that’s quite close to you. It’s not that I find it funny, but maybe just noteworthy or absurd that you could be having a conversation for instance with your spouse, who is saying, “I want a divorce.” And maybe your phone doesn’t stop ringing, and you think it could be another emergency and so you pick it up, but it’s just someone trying to sell you insurance. You have to be like, “Oh it’s not a good time,” and then you hang up, and they [the spouse] tell you that they hate you. We have these ways that we compartmentalise our lives without even thinking about it, and I wanted to portray that somehow in a film that feels like it hovers above reality a little, with the deadpan dialogue and the affect or lack of affect, and certainly in the art direction.

Life is constantly disrupting itself and folding in on itself. When you think it has gotten bad it could still get worse, and when you think it’s good it can still get even better. So I also like to portray those moments within each scene, and each has a moment that has a punchline. It’s not always a funny punchline, but there’s something that takes the scene in a different direction than what you expected. I do that on purpose, and I know when I’m doing it. For people who don’t see the humour or the absurdity in it, I’m certain that would be extremely frustrating. But for people who like those moments where a scene takes an unexpected turn, they can go along for the ride. I think this is a film for them, and I love it when that happens in other films. So as a consumer of films and literature, or even something as popular as music, I love it when someone gives you something that is not the expected trajectory. We have learned how to consume certain media, and some people love that, they need to know what’s coming around the corner, but I actually don’t want to know what’s coming around the corner. I like to be surprised, and I think a lot of people are also willing to not know. Even though this film is not genre committed, it’s not a horror film and it’s not a thriller, but that sense of ‘I’m not sure of what’s coming around the corner’ is very much embedded in a genre idea.

**PR:** The anxiety of living is a form of horror in itself because while it can be joyous and fantastic, an adrenaline rush, living one’s life can also be a waking nightmare. In Knives and Skin as you say, the characters are all grappling with uncertainty, and while not a genre film, I’d describe it as a human horror story.

**JR:** Absolutely, and that was not lost on me when I was writing the script. I can pick through every single character and what they’re dealing with, whether it’s Carolyn...
Harper’s mother who’s dealing with, in my estimation, the most horrific kind of reality, of not knowing where your children are, or not knowing where your loved ones are, even. Or the young women in this film who are trying to live their lives, and there are in particular these adult men who feel totally within their rights to indulge in their wants and desires, whether or not that would impede some young woman’s normal human evolution. Or being a mother who is maybe reaching a point in her life where she’s not sure she could or would have another child, and motherhood is a huge part of her identity. Or another adult who is so consumed and afraid of the environment in general, that she has confined herself to a room covered in tinfoil. All of these things are actually real maladies – I made none of these things up. Also, what if you’re a misfit afro punk girl (Fig. 4) who secretly has a crush on the jock, the football captain, which is an unspeakable social faux pas, or vice versa you’re the football captain and you have a crush on the weirdest girl in school? Everything in this film is about those daily moments of, “Oh God, just don’t let this happen today. Don’t let me fall down in public.” We could go on and on, but for me this film was always about the horror of the everyday.

I also wanted to make a film where the injured girl, the Carolyn Harper character, has will and agency. Her literal movement through the film is mysterious, and she’s not a ghost exactly, she’s not a zombie, but she has will and agency (Fig. 1). There are very few people in the world that get bludgeoned by random psycho killers. There are very many more people whose hearts get broken or fall down in public, or whose children go missing and hopefully come back – it’s random fear.

**PR:** ‘Coming of age’ has been defined as a period in one’s youth, but if the psychological idea that experiences allow us to grow, is it restricted to this one period of our lives? In this film, the adults are examples of how we transform through our experiences, suggesting that the ‘coming of age’ cycle never ends.

**JR:** Yeah, and that was something I set out to do. For the past five or six years I’ve made short films that have been all about that - you have an adult who is having a meltdown, and the child or the younger person comes to the rescue, which is tough because no young person feels prepared to do that. It’s all instinct and we can only hope that young person is resilient, which they mostly are.

*Blood Below the Skin* (2015) is most directly related to *Knives and Skin*. It’s the storyline where a young woman’s mother is similar to the talking tiger shirt mother in *Knives and Skin*, where mom can’t dissociate from herself. The film had its world premiere at the Berlin Film Festival, and I called the young actress who was in the film. I said, “I’m so excited to show this film to an audience in Berlin,
how are you doing?” She was maybe seventeen at the time, and she was fifteen or sixteen when we shot the film. She said her parents were getting a divorce, but it was even more than that. Her mom was divorcing her stepdad - it was like another dad to her, and her mom couldn’t stop crying. She said, “I think I’m going to move in with my grandmother when I turn eighteen.” It was identical to what I was writing about and I realised that there are a lot of adults who have things happen to them. If you’re an adult, there’s nothing that says you can’t feel as heartbroken and as devastated by a break-up as you did when you were fourteen.

So with Knives and Skin, I wanted to make a film where the children or the younger people are the ones who are much more stable than the adults (Fig. 5). Maybe it’s because it’s all still new and they’re honestly just trying to put one foot in front of the other - they’re all living in the present. So for them it’s all potential, and it’s kind of like: ‘Why are you so freaked out about this? Tomorrow’s another day; it’s all potential.’ But when we become adults you understand that it’s not all necessarily potential - it can go downhill from here pretty fast, and for many reasons.

The idea that if you will it, then it will happen is not the case, and I don’t personally depend on religion as a guiding force to reassure me when I’m having a bad day. I just have to say, “Today’s a bad day and tomorrow could be bad too, so let’s just go to sleep and try not to dwell on it.” I wanted to try and flip the script because in reality I do trust young people, and I do want us to believe in young people - I want them to have agency. For instance, right now in the US with the upcoming elections, there’s this push to say to young people that to have a voice you have to vote, and it’s definitely the case because so many young people are so deeply unhappy with Trump, as am I, and so many other people over here as well [in the U.K.] I would hope. So I’m just saying to young people in a very meaningful way that we trust you, there’s a lot of you, you have a voice, make that voice known. Working with young people as a filmmaker, the reality of how they are on set is so awesome and inspiring. They have so much energy and love, especially among the women. There’s this misconception that young women who don’t know each other and are put in a room together will scratch each others eyes out, which is not the case – they become an instant swan.
**PR:** While the female characters show a strength, they wind up in positions in which they are vulnerable. Most of us find ourselves feeling vulnerable, and often in life it’s about how we respond – do we sink or swim? While some feminists may be critical of the empowerment aspects of the film, I’d argue that it’s empowerment with an honesty. And one of the aspects of the film I appreciated was that you lean towards existentialism, where the characters confront meaning and purpose in an uncertain world.

**JR:** Personally, I identify as a feminist, and for me feminism is about human equality. It allows men to be feminine, it allows women to ask for equal wages, it allows queer people and people of colour to say I shouldn’t be ostracised. It’s very inclusive, and in this film, it’s important that we understand that empowerment is not a given. It’s not this constant situation and you can be a very self-confident person and still find yourself in a very compromising situation all of a sudden, and feel conflicted about how to proceed.

So for instance, the young woman who has this relationship with the teacher, that’s entirely autobiographical. When I was in high school there was a student teacher who would write me these very elaborate love poems. I was very naïve; I was sixteen at the time and he would be passing back everyone’s homework. It was for British literature, and I thought everyone was getting these handwritten little notes back. At the time I was feeling like an activist, feeling very feminist and of course I was sixteen, and still a child really. But I had no language or ability to say to this person, “What the fuck are you doing? You’re twenty-eight-years-old, and you’re hitting on a sixteen-year-old. What do you think the end game is here?” My mother was not on drugs and I did not sell him her drugs, so that part is very fictional. But it was the case that I had a teacher who was hitting on me and nothing ever happened between the two of us, but it was damaging in the sense that I had to distance myself from him in that class, because I had no language or experience to confront him, which I think is just true.

There are a lot of films that portray the experiences of let’s say vulnerable people, and they either have to crush the enemy unapologetically, or it’s not an empowering film, which I just don’t think is true. We are fallible and fragile people, and confidence is a little bit of a facade. Well it’s not a little bit, confidence is this giant facade, and we find ourselves in vulnerable positions all the time. I wanted to make a film that also said that everyone is fallible, and everyone is vulnerable, and we all fuck with each other and life also fucks with us. And that’s also why it felt important to have a full ensemble cast: because all of those things couldn’t happen to just one person – it has to feel like we see this arc happening in all of these people.

At some point when I was doing a draft of the script, there were actually more characters that I consolidated. I don’t know what I was thinking, there were seven more characters and I thought: ‘I’m never going to be able to shoot this film to track all these people.’ But I like where it is right now with all the people and all the stories that everyone is keeping track of because for each character at the end of the film, there’s hope, and I wanted the film to at the very least have an ending that suggested hope. I’m not saying that it necessarily has a fully happy ending. It’s impossible to have that with that many people or with a dead girl at its core. But at the end you understand what I said maybe earlier, that as humans we are allowed to make mistakes, small ones and often times pretty big ones, and we can survive that.