

# Seed

US : 1931 : dir. John M Stahl : Universal : 96 min  
 prod: John M Stahl : scr: Gladys Lehman : dir.ph.: Jackson Rose  
*Dick Winslow; Kenneth Selling; Don & Terry Cox; Dickie Moore* .....  
 John Boles; Lois Wilson; Genevieve Tobin; Raymond Hackett; Bette Davis; Frances Dade;  
 ZaSu Pitts; Richard Tucker; Jack Willis; Bill Willis; Helen Parrish

| Ref: | Pages | Sources | Stills | Words | Ω | 8 | € | M | ♀ | Copy on VHS | Last Viewed |
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*Boys left to right with Lois Wilson and John Boles (the young girl is unidentified): Don Cox, Kenneth Selling, Terry Cox. Nothing else is known of either one of them.  
 Source: That was Hollywood – the 1930s*

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A husband leaves his family to becomes a novelist, but returns ten years later. Long-drawn-out domestic drama whose few virtues have not weathered the years."

"Good woman's picture that will strike generous b.o. anywhere." – *Variety*

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"Father of five gets little attention from his wife for the book he's writing, but plenty of it from a former girlfriend, for whom he then swaps his

wife. Ten years later – when he's producing less important work to allow his second wife to live in luxury – he becomes interested in his children again. The stepmother feels shut out more than ever. Tepid melodrama. \*\* "

The Films of Bette Davis review:

"Bart Carter (John Boles), a Bliss Publishing Company clerk, writes a novel in which he has great faith, although his wife Peggy (Lois Wilson) is completely disinterested in anything but her home and their five children. Bart's former girlfriend, Mildred (Genevieve Tobin), the Paris manager of the Bliss firm, expresses a

desire to read his manuscript during a US visit. He invites her to dinner at his home and afterward reads his incomplete manuscript to her.

Mildred is most enthusiastic. She convinces publisher Bliss (Richard Tucker) he should subsidise Bart until he finishes the book. The novel is published and acclaimed. Bart, having received a large cash advance, asks Peggy for a divorce. Shocked by his request, she heartbrokenly consents to his wishes when she learns he intends marrying Mildred.

Ten years later, Bart Carter, now a celebrated writer, is accused by critics who once championed him of doing inferior work. He has found it necessary to produce potboilers to keep Mildred in luxury. The financial strain has also resulted in his failing to provide for his children.

To bring him to his sense of responsibility, Peggy invites him to visit their almost full-grown children. He admires Margaret (Bette Davis), his lovely daughter, and marvels at how well his four sons have managed to get along without him. He implores Peggy to allow the children to live with Mildred and him. Knowing they have reached the age when a father's guidance is important, she agrees.

Aware that Bart loves his children more than he loves her, Mildred is faced with an uncertain future as the outsider in a family unit she almost destroyed.

Bette Davis' role was so unimportant critics never bothered to comment on her performance, and Universal considered her contribution to **"SEED"** so negligible her name seldom appeared in advertisements for it. Miss Davis often neglects to include it among her screen credits."

"It is a lethargic and often dull production, in spite of the good acting by both Genevieve Tobin as Mildred and Miss Wilson as Peggy, ZaSu Pitts as a servant, and passable performances by some other players."

– Mordaunt Hall, **New York Times**

"That Universal has succeeded in making an attractive film out of a homely subject of family life and a father's ambitions is due to the intelligent cast selection, acting, and general treatment. Few pictures move with a more even pace." – Shan, **Weekly Variety**

**Illustrated History of the Movies – Bette Davis**  
comments:

"...Before release, **"GAMBLING DAUGHTERS"** was retitled **"BAD SISTER"** (1931). Davis called it the worst experience of her life. Surprisingly, when option time arrived, her contract was renewed for three months. The reason was not her performance in **"BAD SISTER"**, but rather the recommendation of that film's photographer, Karl Freund, who told Laemmle "Davis has lovely eyes".

However, what Universal had in store for her was no better than **"BAD SISTER"**. First, she was cast as one of the grown children of divorced parents John Boles and Lois Wilson in John M Stahl's **"SEED"** (1931), a slowly paced family soap opera. Its source was a novel by Charles G Norris advocating birth control, but aside from the film's title it gave little indication of dealing with so touchy a subject. Davis thinks her part could easily have been edited out."

**That Was Hollywood – the 1930s** review:

"Female audiences packed the matinees to see John Boles as the writer who abandons his wife (Lois Wilson) and their five children for another woman (Genevieve Tobin). John M Stahl directed Gladys Lehman's screen adaptation of the Charles G Norris novel. Potentially controversial aspects relating to birth control in the novel were deleted, along with references to the church and religion, and two bishops from Chicago were allowed to vet the script. Despite this, it was Universal's biggest hit of the year after **"DRACULA"**. Bette Davis had one of her first roles as one of the five daughters<sup>1</sup>."

**The Universal Story** review:

"John Boles, deprived of recourse to song, made heavy weather of **"SEED"**, a turgid drama (based on the novel by Charles G Norris) in which he played a would-be author who deserts his wife and five children for a high-powered employee of the publishing concern where he works as a clerk. Lois Wilson plays the deserted

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<sup>1</sup> *Four of the five daughters were boys, but nobody's perfect...*

wife and Genevieve Tobin the other woman. Both were fine in the circumstances. It was the circumstances themselves – comprising, as they did, an unconvincing screenplay (by Gladys Lehman) and clumsy direction by John M Stahl, that needed avoiding. Bette Davis made no impression whatsoever in the small role of Boles' daughter. Also: ZaSu Pitts (a servant yet again), Raymond Hackett, Frances Dade and Richard Tucker."

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Radio Times Guide to Films", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

No further information currently available. Of interest more for what was expunged than for what remains, seemingly. A pro-contraception melodrama with all reference to that subject expunged, and vetted as such by two Chicago bishops. 1930 was the year the Hays Code was inaugurated, so one can scarcely blame the studio for fighting shy of an *ishoo* that still generates considerable heat – in a grossly-overpopulated world – seventy years on. To some fundamentalist opinions, contraception is merely a sort of pre-emptive abortion, but the primary objection to it remains that it isolates sex from the reproductive function and thereby promotes licentiousness. I've always thought that was one of the best arguments for homosexuality – it reduces population pressures, and separates the parenting impulse altogether from the appetites of the loins – which is surely no bad thing.

The still overleaf presumably shows the family prior to separation, in which case the absent fourth son was Dickie Moore aged 6 – already more of a seasoned troupier than Davis – with over a dozen films behind him. In 1932 he was Marlene Dietrich's son in "**BLONDE VENUS**". Dick Winslow was 16. He had played Jackie Coogan's hated brother Sid in the 1930 "**TOM SAWYER**", was with Philippe DeLacey in "**SARAH AND SON**" (30), but made his debut at 6 in "**MY BOY**" (21).

For contrast see "**AUTHOR! AUTHOR!**", in which it's the wife who deserts her playwright husband and an army of children from her former marriages, or "**MOTHER'S BOYS**", which brought to us the *absentee-mom-as-psychopath*. See subject index under **DIVORCE / CUSTODY BATTLES**.