

# A History of Violence

Germany/USA 2005 95 mins

## Crew and Cast

Director	David Cronenberg
Screenplay	Josh Olson
Cinematography	Peter Suschkyew
Tom Stall	Viggo Mortensen
Edie Stall	Maria Bello
Carl Fogarty	Ed Harris
Jack Stall	Ashton Holmes
Richie Cusack	William Hurt

## Synopsis

David Cronenberg directed this screen adaptation of a graphic novel by John Wagner and Vince Locke which explores how an act of heroism unexpectedly changes a man's life. Tom Stall lives a quiet life in a small Indiana town, running the local diner with his wife, Edie, and raising their two children. But the quiet is shattered one day when a pair of criminals on the run from the police walk into his diner just before closing time. After they attack one of the customers and seem ready to kill several of the people inside, Tom jumps to the fore, grabbing a gun from one of the criminals and killing the invaders. Tom is immediately hailed as a hero by his employees and the community at large, but Tom seems less than comfortable with his new notoriety. One day, a man with severe facial scars, Carl Fogarty, sits down at the counter and begins addressing Tom as Joey, and begins asking him questions about the old days in Philadelphia. While Tom seems puzzled, Carl's actions suggest that the quiet man pouring coffee at the diner may have a dark and violent past he isn't eager to share with others — as well as some old scores that haven't been settled.



## Reviews

David Cronenberg has always been a name closely associated with the horror genre, and even when his films don't overtly contain the elements generally associated with the critically maligned genre, they can be just as horrifying as any out-and-out fright flick. This bold but shockingly low-key thriller is without question one of the reigning body-horror master's most mainstream cinematic outings to date (no videotape-swallowing orifices or medieval-looking medical instruments here); however, the film's depiction of the vicious cyclical nature of violence is as horrific and challenging as anything in the veteran director's notoriously gruesome filmography. The effectiveness of violence in any film is directly tied to stylistic choices utilized to portray the violence onscreen, and few directors are more aware of this fact than Cronenberg. By contrasting the horrific and often graphic acts of violence committed by the characters in *A History of Violence* with quiet scenes at the family dinner table or tender moments between husband and wife, Cronenberg punctuates the destructive actions of his characters in a manner that is undeniably effective for those looking for something deeper than the average revenge tale — showing a filmmaker still very much in command of his material. As the dire situation steadily elevates and the outwardly peaceful protagonist is forced to act out in the same manner as his tormentors, Cronenberg reveals the character's true nature while showing enough faith in his audience to let the situation unfold naturally. This narrative restraint shows a filmmaker whose dramatic strengths are growing with age rather than weakening (a sad problem that seems to plague many genre filmmakers of Cronenberg's generation). Even the lesser-drawn characters in *A History of Violence* seem to have an added dimension of motivation that ties into the theories of violence presented in the film, with the more prominent supporting players, including Ed Harris and William Hurt, turning in particularly effective performances. Though some viewers may find it difficult to connect with the archetypal characters in *A History of Violence* on an emotional level, the message regarding the inherently cyclical nature of violence is both effectively clear and viscerally presented, offering a testament to Cronenberg's continuing willingness to challenge his audience while simultaneously crafting a compelling mainstream thriller. — Jason

*Buchanan, Empire*

Though this is certainly Cronenberg's most 'mainstream' movie in years, the fact that it's so immediately enjoyable as a terrific thriller does not diminish its less obvious virtues. Indeed, its apparent effortlessness in transcending simple generic concerns to interrogate a range of issues surrounding violence, justice, heroism and identity should not distract attention from its subtly subversive critique of the American Dream (or should one say nightmare?). Diner proprietor Tom Stall, his lawyer wife Edie and their two kids seem to have a pretty idyllic existence in smalltown America until a couple of gleefully murderous hoods turn up by chance at the eatery, and an order for coffee escalates to terrorising Tom and his customers. Quick thinking on his part leads to reluctant celebrity — and, still more unwelcome — further visits, from sinister wise guys hinting that Tom may not be quite the clean-cut Ordinary Joe he says he is. Besides playing fast and loose (in the most elegantly rigorous way, of course) with family-under-siege thriller conventions, Cronenberg deftly undermines narrative expectations by implying that happy families may in fact be forms of imprisonment, and that trying to conform to an American way may involve lying to ourselves and others about the very human capacity for monstrosity. Here, as a repressed past erupts with a vengeance, violence begets violence, and safe, traditional ethics are swiftly revealed as virtually irrelevant. All this is executed with Cronenberg's now customarily brilliant wit, bravura style and perfect pacing, not to mention peak-form performances from a superb cast that memorably includes William Hurt and Ed Harris. Unlike the tough but unremarkable pulp fiction of the original graphic novel, the film (which differs from the book in numerous important respects) succeeds not only in terms of action and suspense but as cautionary fable, historical allegory, social satire and moral disquisition. In short, it's marvellous, and up there with *Spider* as Cronenberg's very best work.

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