



LAST

WOMAN

STANDING

A CELEBRATION OF THE FINAL GIRL, SOME OF CINEMA'S STRONGEST AND  
MOST RESILIENT SURVIVORS, FOUND THROUGHOUT HORROR FILMS

The final girl' is a horror trope that, surprisingly, took six films to be explicitly referenced in a *Scream*. Talking to her eventual killer on her phone, Blackmore University professor and slasher movie expert Laura Crane is explaining what fascinates her about the genre: "You can really examine the cultures by looking at the tropes of the time," she says. "The masked killer, the final girl, don't split up, don't have sex..."

Since the first *Scream*, audiences have become pretty clued up about the various clichés that make up a slasher flick, thanks to movie-literate characters like Randy and his niece Mindy. From "you can never have sex" to "you can never drink or do drugs" to "never, ever, ever under any circumstances say: 'I'll be right back'", these are the rules that will ensure that, by the closing act, you're the last person standing, the one who outruns, outthinks and occasionally out-stabs the monster. But it helps, you see, if you're female.

Look at your favourite horrors and there she is – she's Laurie Strode in *Halloween*, she's Jess Bradford in *Black Christmas*, she's Diane Adams in *Silent Night, Bloody Night*, she's Sally Hardesty in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, she's Ginny Field in *Friday The 13th Part II*, she's Ellen Ripley in *Alien*, and she's Sidney Prescott in *Scream*.

The expression has become so well known that it's twice been the title of a horror film (2015's *Final Girl* and the same year's slasher comedy *The Final Girls*), while Grady Hendrix's 2021 novel *The Final Girl Support Group*, about a collection of women who are the sole survivors

of massacres, is to be made into a TV series. Then there's the horror podcast *The Final Girls* and a board game – Final Girl – which casts the player as the "fearless female protagonist facing off against relentless killers".

The phrase was first coined by academic Carol J Clover in her 1992 book *Men, Women, And Chain Saws: Gender In The Modern Horror Film* (side note: this ain't no beach read), describing the slasher film's last survivor as "the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded... She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued

(ending A), or to kill him herself (ending B)."

But are all final girls created equal? Some end the movie with a petrified scream (Sally Hardesty), while others are seen walking away from the carnage with a cool 'job done' look on their face. (Sidney is particularly badass when she shoots Billy in the head in the last moments of *Scream*.) And while many of the early final girls were virgins, not having had sex is no longer a prerequisite for modern-day survivors.

Asked about the final girl trope in 2022 by Pride Source, Kevin Williamson said he believed the concept resonates with gay horror fans as well as women. "It's always the survival tales that connect us," the writer explained. "And so I think that's one of the reasons final girls are so important to us as a gay audience. I think gay kids everywhere understand that survival element that we have to sort of create in ourselves. And when we're watching that final girl have to prove herself and rise to the challenge and save her life, I think that's something gay kids anywhere can relate to."



Final girl Diane Adams in *Silent Night, Bloody Night*



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Final girls Sidney Prescott in *Scream* (left); *I Know What You Did Last Summer*'s Julie James (below); and Ginny Field in *Friday The 13th Part II* (right)





Above: Ripley in *Alien*. Right, from top: Sally Hardesty in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*; Laurie Strode in *Halloween*; and Maxine Minx in *MaxXXine*

Often, as soon as a trope is identified, filmmakers work their hardest to dodge it, but that doesn't seem to have been the case with the final girl. Ti West played with the idea in his *X* trilogy – the character of Maxine Minx (Mia Goth) is the sole survivor of the first film, running over the movie's killer, the elderly Pearl. Except Pearl is played, under old-age make-up, by the very same actress, who reappears as the younger version of the character in its follow-up. The final girl as both murderer and victim.

While many genres have been scolded for their conservative attitudes to gender (it took Marvel 24 films to put out their first woman-fronted superhero movie), the slasher has always been progressive. The final girl has, over 50 years, thrown up more strong, positive female role models than any number of thrillers or action movies or crime films. For a genre that's too often accused of harming society, it's actually one that has done the most, we'd argue, for female representation on screen.

Long live the final girl. ■