

Herpetological Horrors No. 4

By Russ Case

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Alligator Movie Poster.

Alligator Movie Poster - Spanish Version.

One of the most famous urban myths is the one about alligators in city sewers. Who knows, maybe some baby caimans have ended up in the sewer on occasion – don't most things end up in the sewer at some point? – but at one time it seemed stories about gators inhabiting sewers were somewhat prevalent. You don't seem to hear as much about such infestations anymore. I guess the media has bigger things to focus on, such as terrorism and swine flu.

Alligator (1980) is one of the better entries in my Herpetological Horrors rundown. It was actually a pretty good movie, about a giant alligator loose in the sewers of Chicago. The movie begins with a girl buying a baby alligator while on vacation in Florida. Taking the plot's idea from the urban myth, the pet gator gets flushed down the toilet by the girl's animal-hating father soon after it arrives at its new home in Chicago. Years go by, with the resourceful gator not just surviving but thriving in the sewer system. Conducive to its health and vigor is its favorite dish: a steady supply of pet corpses, a byproduct of experiments involving a new growth hormone. These are secretly discarded into the sewers by one of my favorite character actors, Sydney Lassick (his most famous role was as Cheswick – the balding, childish, whiny patient with the glasses -- in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest).

Apparently the experimental growth hormone works extraordinarily well. As a result of eating the deceased cats and dogs Lassick trundles into the sewer in his shopping cart, the alligator has grown to epic proportions – 36 feet, to be exact (and the trailer, which you can watch below, is, oddly, very specific about this length). It's one tough gator, and, of course, it's only a matter of time before it develops a taste for other animals, of the human variety.

Once the human body parts begin showing up, a cop (Robert Forster) gets involved, and he eventually teams up with a lady herpetologist. Together they endeavor to bring down Ramón (that's the name the girl gave her baby gator at the outset; now he's Ramón the Giant Killer Gator!). Ramón grows increasingly feisty and grumpy, and before too long he resorts to crashing from the sewers up through a sidewalk, on his way to bigger and presumably tastier prey.

Alligator doesn't take itself too seriously, and there is a good dose of humor throughout. The screenplay is by veteran screenwriter and director John Sayles, definitely the most talented screenwriter to ever pen a giant crocodilian movie. This one is worth checking out.

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