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Walter Mitty Review: Ben Stiller Engineers a James Thurber Classic for Modern Audiences

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Action & Adventure, Comedy, Drama

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This isn't the only Walter Mitty review. Rotten Tomatoes gave the film a Critics Score of 51% and Audience Score of 70%. IMDB gave the film a 7.3 out of 10.

Everyone daydreams, but probably not as well as Walter Mitty. Mitty first appeared in a 1939 issue of *The New Yorker* in James Thurber's short story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," and then in a 1947 film adaption of the tale. In 2013, Mitty again made it to the big screen, this time at the direction of Ben Stiller. Stiller, who also plays the titular character, brought his Mitty to *Life* magazine, where, for 16 years, he has lived vicariously through globe-trotting photographer Sean O'Connell and supplemented his own lack of adventure (and lack of a girlfriend) with fantastic daydreams. Mitty's story is weaved through the publication's transition from print to online as he seeks out a missing image, connecting with a coworker and satisfying a long overdue need for adventure in the process.

From the outset, the greatest challenge that Stiller's *Walter Mitty* had was to navigate the awkward terrain between the original short story and the earlier film adaption in creating his own version. With two shining predecessors (the 1947 film has an 83% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes), 2013 *Walter Mitty* had a lot to live up to. Adaptations and remakes are always tricky business, and, much like a parking authority official, there's always someone whose sole purpose in life is to lurk about until they can slam someone for a minor violation.

"While the original Mitty was a heartbreakingly sad figure, this Mitty is a weak parable for living life to the fullest (or something like that)," laments Austin Trunick of *Under the Radar*. "Who would have predicted that the rich fantasy world of James Thurber's day-dreaming Walter Mitty looks a lot like a second-rate Wes Anderson movie?" adds Greg Evans of *Bloomberg News*. Solid observations, boys.

The film opens up with a shot of Mitty's checkbook, riddled with expenses for his mom and sister: retirement home deposit, family piano storage and delivery, and a fine for when his actress sister Odessa went Ferris Bueller on jury duty. It's possible he manages the family account, but it's more likely that he is the family account. In one scene, we can hear Odessa in the background talking to their mother about how her role in *Grease* is unpaid, but that's okay because "it's not about money." Hard eye roll.

In all the times I've seen this movie, this scene still makes me cringe. Walter retreats to his apartment after being fired. He's hosting his widowed mother and her grand piano until a retirement villa can open up. Immediately upon opening the door, Odessa is on him about tipping the piano movers. What was she going to do if Walter came home late that night? Send the piano movers off sans tip because Walter's complacency in his role as provider enables her to avoid making money herself? Or maybe a wad of cash from her Etsy store would magically appear, as it only does when her brother isn't around to foot the bill?

As if being taken advantage of by his family isn't sad enough, Mitty gets on eHarmony to connect with a woman that works in the same building as him and eats at an American fast food chain restaurant while in Iceland. That last one might not be the type of "sad" Austin Trunick was thinking of, but everything else is still fucking sad. And it matters that Mitty is genuinely pathetic because we need to relate to him and to understand his constant need to escape via daydreaming. And when his resources for easy escape, cool pics and a charming coworker, are severed by the impending end of *Life*, we need to celebrate with him when he jumps on a helicopter in Nuuk, Greenland.

And then there's poor Greg Evans of Bloomberg News, making the grave mistake of trying to elevate his comments by posing as a literary connoisseur. "The rich fantasy world of James Thurber's day-dreaming Walter Mitty." Where does one come up with phrases like this? As if descriptive elements are a hallmark of Thurber's style and not present in most works of writing. The marker of Thurber's legacy is that he somehow managed to achieve literary acclaim working in a genre often overlooked by the "literary" community: humor. This is why readers still love his work, and this is what gets translated so well onto the screen.

The daydreams of our most recent Mitty don't shy away from the absurd (think *Benjamin Button*). He brilliantly creates new possibilities for 3-legged dogs, effortlessly seduces women with poetry falcons, and calls upon his superhuman strength to fight for one Stretch Armstrong. These are weird scenarios for sure, but their quirky nature and exaggerated deliverance make for some humorous moments, only made better by the range of abilities displayed by Stiller, Kristen Wiig, and Adam Scott. Long story short, you'll enjoy the film much more when you don't impose some half-assed "literary" logic to what you're watching. James Thurber is screaming over in Greenlawn Cemetery.

If I had to say one bad thing about *Walter Mitty*, it would be the overt product placement. The script tries and fails to gracefully weave in its sponsors. Papa John's, eHarmony, and Cinnabon, among others, all get a shout-out or even a major plot device. It's not distracting enough to make me think the film deserves a Tomatometer score of 51%, but it does feel forced.

So how does all this shit make a nice fucking movie? I dunno, it just works. It's the early 21st century, and we can all relate to how the combination of a capitalist society (work, bitch) and a culture of media consumption (you worked so hard, now watch this) keep us complacent with where we are. *Walter Mitty* is like *Don Jon*, but for mundane people. Sometimes, daydreaming up the perfect scenario is going to be better than your real life. And sometimes, masturbating to porn is simply going to be more satisfying than actually fucking someone. But if it's always better, you might need to re-evaluate how you do the second thing.

Key Takeaways:

- Walter Mitty is one sad little man. But, that sad little man's leap from dreamer to doer (or whatever the active version of a "dreamer" is) feels earned.
- It's really lame and ineffective to critique two different media in the same way.
- Humor's okay.
- When it comes to successfully overt content and ad pairings, you'll never beat *Arrested Development* and Burger King.
- "You're awesome Walter" – Andy Richter
- Always get Andy Richter.

Movie Info (from IMDb)

Production Company: Samuel Goldwyn Films

Cast: Ben Stiller, Kristen Wiig, Shirley MacLaine, Adam Scott, Kathryn Hahn, Sean Penn

Director: Ben Stiller

Screenwriter: Steve Conrad (based on the short story by James Thurber)

Running Time: 114 minutes

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