

Frustrating Journey Into ‘The Secret Life of Walter Mitty’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 24, 2013 - 10:31am

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

I so want to love Ben Stiller’s “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.” Stiller’s directorial work on films like “The Cable Guy” and “Tropic Thunder” was underrated, the source material is great, the message of living in the moment has more value in an increasingly cluttered world, and the time seems right for an imaginative journey into the mind of a likable protagonist like Mr. Mitty. So, why don’t I love it? Where did “Walter Mitty” lose his way? Stiller’s film is far from a horrible one but it is undeniably a disappointment, especially given how often it hints at the film it could have been while constantly just missing the mark.

Stiller plays Mitty as a sad sack, a man who daydreams his way through life when he’s not busy balancing his checkbook or keeping tabs on the archives he manages at Life Magazine. Mitty is nice to a fault but often zones out into a world of his own imagination, one in which he is typically an action hero or the object of affection for his new love interest, a sweet co-worker named Cheryl Melhoff (Kristen Wiig). Mitty has a more outgoing sister named Odessa (Kathryn Hahn) and a supportive mother (Shirley MacLaine) but his life seems relatively routine until two men shake it up.



The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

Photo credit: Fox Pictures

The first is Ted Hendricks (Adam Scott), a suit brought in by Life Magazine to handle the transition from a print publication to an online one. Ted doesn’t like Walter. He’s the alpha male in everything he does, bullying Walter around the office. And he is given even more reason to do so when the notorious Sean O’Connell (Sean Penn), the most famous photographer in the history of the magazine, essentially sends Mitty on the journey of his life. As he has for years, O’Connell delivers his latest batch of photo negatives to Mitty, including a note that says that

negative 25 is his masterpiece, sure to grace the cover of the last issue of Life. Of course, #25 is missing. Mitty has to track down the negative by traveling the globe to find Sean, all the while working on his blooming romance with Cheryl, and breaking out of the shell created by his overactive imagination.

Writer Steve Conrad has the best of intentions in his design to create a modern Forrest Gump, someone carried along on an unexpected adventure that changes his life, but this iteration of Mitty simply doesn't work. He's not engaging enough as a protagonist for us to care much about what happens to him. I found Cheryl, Sean, and most of the people that Mitty met along the way more interesting than the title character, which is not a problem for a certain subgenre of film in which the protagonist is intentionally a blank slate but that's not this story. Mitty needs to be someone who we root for in love and life and he's simply too flat of a protagonist in this film, more through Conrad's dull presentation than Stiller's perfectly adequate performance. Stiller works in episodic ways, whether it's a nice scene with Wiig or an interesting chapter in his adventure, but the cumulative impact of Mitty's story is surprisingly dull on an emotional level. It doesn't connect.



The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

Photo credit: Fox Pictures

One can tell that Stiller the director sensed the narrative needed some pumping up visually and so he pulls out a number of filmmaking tricks – some work and some feel like window dressing on a film that needed more humanity and to look less like a Train music video. I admired some of Stiller's music choices and cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh certainly knows how to shoot Stiller skateboarding down a steep hill with flair but I enjoyed more grounded moments with MacLaine and Penn more.

There are some notable surreal moments of Mitty imagination, such as a great bit with "Space Oddity" that I won't spoil here but at least half of the Mitty interludes are too loud, too abrasive, and just too silly. It's as if Conrad and Stiller couldn't find the right tone for Mitty's mind. Is he a pop culture junkie? A literary dreamer? Even his imagination seems just a bit off tonally. And when it dissipates over the course of the film, I wonder about the movie's message – must we eliminate all of our daydreams to find a happy ending? It feels like this movie could have used more imagination instead of teaching us to use it less.

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" stars Ben Stiller, Kristen Wiig, Kathryn Hahn, Adam Scott, Shirley MacLaine, and Sean Penn. It was adapted by Steve Conrad and directed by Stiller. It opens on Christmas Day and is rated PG.



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