

Susan Sarandon Plays Smother Mother in 'The Meddler'

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- [Cecily Strong](#) [2]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [3]
- [J.K. Simmons](#) [4]
- [Jason Ritter](#) [5]
- [Lorene Scafaria](#) [6]
- [Lucy Punch](#) [7]
- [Michael McKean](#) [8]
- [Movie Review](#) [9]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [10]
- [Rose Byrne](#) [11]
- [Seeking a Friend for the End of the World](#) [12]
- [Sony Pictures Classics](#) [13]
- [Susan Sarandon](#) [14]
- [The Meddler](#) [15]



Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Some mothers are born great, others have greatness thrust upon them. The Mom of “The Meddler” – portrayed with precise intuition by Susan Sarandon – is of the greatness-of-the-future variety, by simply evolving to be herself. Rose Byrne as daughter Lori tags along.

What places this story above and beyond the norm is that [it's the true story of writer/director Lorene Scafaria](#). [16] Her mother really did move to Los Angeles to be near her, after Lorene's father and her mother's husband passed away. In essence, it's an exploration into the emotions of the isolation of loss, and the coping mechanisms that different people use to mitigate it. What makes the film exceptional is how Sarandon handles the material written by Scafaria, and brings it to life. Her Marnie character is forced to understand why she is suddenly living a life she never planned for, and in that sense provides a deep well of feeling for a character that starts out as one thing, and becomes another.

Marnie (Sarandon) likes to call her daughter Lori (Rose Byrne) several times a day, because she “just has one more thing to tell her.” In a voice over, Marnie describes her new life in Los Angeles, which is financially free but socially inert. Her thirtysomething TV writer daughter is suffering through a harsh break up from Jacob (Jason Ritter), a self-absorbed movie star, and it's been two years since Marnie's New Jersey-based husband has passed away.



Marnie (Susan Sarandon) and Zipper (J.K. Simmons) in 'The Meddler'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Eventually Lori escapes the clutches of the too-much-in-her-life mother, by giving the excuse of work in New York City, and Marnie is stuck on the other coast, wondering who to nurture. Enter Jillian (Cecily Strong), who desires a fancy wedding with her same sex partner, which Marnie steps in to provide. At the same time the meddling matriarch meets Zipper (J.K. Simmons), who takes an unwanted shine to her. Life is pulling Marnie into unexpected directions.

Interestingly, the strongest emotion that overwhelms the film is loneliness – Marnie, Lori and Zipper all share that drink, but it’s better than drinking alone (thanks, Billy). Loneliness causes everything else...Marnie’s infiltrations, Lori’s depression and Zipper’s push-too-much attempts to connect. Scafaria’s screenplay is subtle within the theme, but the motivating factor of being alone in each of the character’s situations eventually bubble to the surface. Marnie even becomes an extra in a movie, just because she’s wandering alone.

Susan Sarandon completely understands who Marnie is, she described it as a “deep surface.” Her reaction to completely upending her life is to fill it with that upending, until she hits the wall. To create yourself, after a lifetime in a wife and mother role, is a profound and relatable transition, one that many middle age women go through in their lives. The way that Marnie does it, through Scafaria’s script, is as distinct as a fingerprint, and Sarandon does well in milking both the sadness and courage.

Rose Byrne also is a standout. In what could have been a simple supporting role as a depressed rag doll becomes a more comic Chaplin-esque pathos. What is remarkable about the very attractive Byrne is that she is transformative, and gives enough touches to the role – she has also done it in other films – to play the character rather than the surface. She and Sarandon have terrific chemistry and timing in their encounters, very necessary to make the relationship authentic.



Marnie and Lori (Rose Byrne) React in ‘The Meddler’

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

And, of course, J.K. Simmons is always welcome. It had to be weird to get the role of a lifetime (2014’s “Whiplash”) at an advanced part of his career, and I sense the gratitude he expressed during that award’s season (as he was cleaning up) in the sureness in which he takes on all roles. Did Jonathan Kimble Simmons of Detroit, MI, ever think he’d kiss Susan Sarandon in a movie? There’s a lot of gravitas in that smooch.

But maybe the best highlight is Lorene Scafaria herself, who extends the feelings she evoked in “Seeking a Friend for the End of the World” into a completely different relationship realm, but it is no less impassioned or involved. There are not many people in the movie-creating business who are willing to go there, so watch out for the meddling of Ms. S. in our own cultural consciousness.

“The Meddler” continues its nationwide release in Chicago on April 29th. Featuring Susan Sarandon, J.K. Simmons, Rose Byrne, Cecily Strong, Michael McKean, Jason Ritter and Lucy Punch. Written and directed by Lorene Scafaria. Rated “PG-13”



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