

## Catch Me If You Can: "The Brave One" and "Mr. Woodcock"

Written by Mike Schulz

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### **THE BRAVE ONE**

For what is essentially a lurid revenge thriller, Neil Jordan's *The Brave One* is fascinatingly complex ... for a while.

On the surface, its storyline is simplicity itself. Jodie Foster plays Erica Bain, the host of a nightly radio program dedicated to the glories of New York City. (With her mellifluous, throaty alto, no actor has ever been better cast as a soothing radio personality.) Yet after a vicious Central Park mugging leaves her badly beaten and her fiancé (Naveen Andrews) dead, Bain secures a gun for protection, and gradually turns into a Manhattan vigilante, purposely entering threatening situations and embarking on a self-righteous killing spree.

That description, however, doesn't do justice to the "why" behind Bain's vengeance-fueled behavior, and the "why" is what *The Brave One*, for much of its length, is actually (and refreshingly) about.

As the dead bodies accumulate and become the business of a melancholy detective (the great Terrence Howard), it becomes clear that Bain desperately

*wants*

to get caught; she's frightened and sickened by this person she has become. The movie's best scene, late in the film, finds her sitting in a café with the detective (whom she has befriended),

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and their strained conversation - with Ray Charles' "You Don't Know Me" playing on the radio - hints that he knows she's the killer, and that she

*knows*

he knows, and neither is in a position to do much about it; in this and numerous other scenes, Jordan pulls you into the nightmare

*behind*

Bain's actions, and Foster displays a genius for suggesting messy, contradictory states of mind. The movie might appear to be a female-driven

*Death Wish*

, but for long stretches, it boasts a considerable amount of psychological nuance.

Psychological nuance doesn't sell tickets, though, so the film is inevitably, dishearteningly saddled with audience-goosing assassinations preceded by the requisite tough-guy punchlines - "I want my dog back" is *The Brave One's* version of "Go ahead, make my day" - and one of those "crowd-pleasing" climaxes that would please more crowds if it wasn't such a cheat; the screenwriters appear stymied by how to get their leads where they need them to be, and take an embarrassing number of shortcuts. The film's ludicrous final reels, though, aren't quite enough to derail the experience as a whole.

*One*

*The Brave*

may

be a pulpy revenge fantasy, but considering Jordan's and Foster's intelligence and commitment, revenge, here, is pretty damned sweet.



**MR. WOODCOCK**

There's a scene about halfway through Craig Gillespie's comedy *Mr. Woodcock* in which Seann William Scott, portraying successful self-help author John Farley, finds his mother (Susan Sarandon) crying in the kitchen, and she tearfully reveals that she's no longer dating the film's title character (Billy Bob Thornton). As you likely know from the previews - which seem to have been running since the late 1990s - Mr. Woodcock is the sadistic gym teacher who made life hell for the adolescent Farley, and during a book tour, the young man learns that this monster has been involved with his mom for months. Subsequently, the news that they've apparently broken up fills the young man with joy, and in an already understated performance, Scott comes through with perhaps the best, funniest acting of his career, as Mom continues to weep and

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Farley subtly tries to hide his shit-eating grin.

But wait! I haven't gotten to the punchline yet! Mom, it turns out, isn't crying from misery but from *happiness*, because she and Mr. Woodcock ... are actually *engaged*! Ba-dum-*ching*! Farley's hopes are immediately shattered, but so are those of the audience members, or at least those of us who had been watching

*Mr. Woodcock*

and had been marveling at how not-bad it was.

During the movie's first half, the hostility between the author and the gym teacher is nicely textured, Sarandon's effortless good humor is incredibly welcome, and the too-few scenes of Thornton berating and abusing his youthful charges are priceless; the actor reminds you that he's frequently cast as this sort of hard-bitten bastard for a reason - he's *really* good at it. (Thornton's bone-dry meanness here makes you laugh at routines you've seen dozens of times before, oftentimes in movies starring Billy Bob Thornton.)

Yet as soon as that engagement is announced, the movie turns into everything those omnipresent trailers *told* us it would be: a loud, formulaic, unfunny vehicle that mistakes *über-vi*olence for jokes, that establishes Mr. Woodcock as a hateful wretch only to have characters come to

*respect*

his unconventional methods (it's the

*License to Wed*

syndrome), and that trashes all the goodwill attached to its performers. I never thought I'd be put in the position of defending Seann William Scott, but this movie is an insult to the cleverness and unexpected humanity that he, Thornton, and Sarandon are bringing to it; they're spending far too much time trying to convince us that

*Mr. Woodcock isn't*

as witless as it actually is.