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THE SECRET LIFE OF WALTER MITTY, MANDELA: LONG WALK TO FREEDOM, and GRUDGE MATCH

With apologies to Keanu Reeves fans and the true Beliebers among you, I still haven't gotten around to *47 Ronin* or *Justin Bieber's Believe*. (In the case of the latter, I'm not sure I ever will, although stranger things have happened, I guess) But among the numerous titles that opened opposite *The Wolf of Wall Street* on Christmas Day, I did manage to catch a few of 'em

Director/star Ben Stiller's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* concerns a sad-sack, photo-department employee for *Life* magazine whose über-active fantasies sort of come true when he embarks on a globe-trotting expedition to retrieve a missing film negative. It's all artfully composed and sometimes beautifully shot – the Icelandic vistas are particularly lovely – and there are fine, simple turns delivered by Kristen Wiig as Walter's crush, Shirley MacLaine as his mom, Kathryn Hahn as his sister, and Sean Penn as a salt-of-the-earth photojournalist with a warm smile and distressing lack of interest in cell phones. But Stiller's blank-faced melancholy, exacerbated by the film's sappy score, makes Walter a pretty tiresome lead, and the movie strangely cheats on its own premise by making this purportedly – and, for the narrative to work, intentionally – unexceptional man very exceptional indeed; when people aren't looking (Wiig's screen son excepted), Walter pulls off dynamic skateboarding moves that would put Tony Hawk to shame. Instead of being

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about an ordinary nebbish who gains confidence and charisma via extraordinary circumstances, S

Secret Life

winds up being about a fiercely talented man just too timid to actually do

anything, and you end up wanting to slap Walter, and Stiller, for the time wasted at this overly precious, "

Carpe diem

!" endeavor. (Which, here, actually comes off more like "Carpe diem. I suppose.") Turns out that if Kristen Wiig's character just turned her head two seconds sooner and caught Walter's heel flip for herself, we all could've saved ourselves the tedious hour and a half to come.



Truth be told, I was somewhat dreading *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, only because I was afraid of being bored stiff by an incredibly worthy true-life story getting Hollywood's traditional greatest-hits treatment and being reduced to a series of historically factual (or *near*

-factual) events that didn't provide much in the way of nuance, insight, or legitimate passion. And in many regards, director Justin Chadwick's docu-drama is exactly the sort of unthreatening, good-for-you bio-pic that used to be a staple of movies of the week on network television. (Though told mostly chronologically, we're given very little sense of passing time in a story for which our understanding of the passage of long years is absolutely essential, and the film's staged apartheid atrocities aren't even a tenth as disturbing as they really should be.) Yet if you accept the film as a primer on Nelson Mandela's life – especially one geared to student audiences who may not know much of the man beyond the import of his name – the movie does its job with more-than-solid craftsmanship and momentum; Chadwick's outing may be dry, but it's never dull. And while Idris Elba offers a perfectly respectable take on the South African leader – proud and thoughtful and a little vain, and far more engaging than Morgan Freeman's Mandela in 2009's

Invictus –

Naomie Harris is absolutely stunning as Winnie Mandela, her arc from blushing public servant to fiery moral conscience detailed with splendid heartbreak and strength. Harris' final shot in the film, watching Winnie's ex-husband on television with a stare that could freeze, suggests that the end of this cinematic tale is actually the beginning of another, potentially more dynamic one;

Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom

is the rare bio-pic for which you're left hoping for an immediate sequel.

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