

# The Secret Life of Walter Mitty (2013)

Rated PG. Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 54 min.

Our content advisories (1-10): Violence 1-; Language 2;  
Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 3.5

*With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words...*

*Ecclesiastes 5:7a*

Now a veteran director, Ben Stiller has dared to remake a classic film despite the dismal record of most attempts. Here, however, is that rare remake that proves to be better than the original. My memory of the 1947 original was that it was a delightful film with Danny Kaye at his tongue-twisting best, but when I watched it again recently on Turner Classic Movies, I realized how shallow and meaningless was the plot—one having Mitty getting involved with a mysterious woman and some Dutch jewels hidden from the Nazis.

Ben Stiller has raised the level of the story by setting it at LIFE Magazine rather than at the pulp fiction publishing office where Mitty toils. He works along side an assistant as a negative assets manager deep within the bowels of the sprawling offices. This means that he receives all the negatives from LIFE'S far-flung photographers and prepares them for publication. Although he has never met him face to face, Mitty has often talked by phone with the magazine's ace photojournalist Sean O'Connell (Sean Penn), who in one scene seems to beckon to him from a large wall-mounted picture showing him in action.

Mitty has a crush on fellow staff member Cheryl Melhof

(Kristen Wiig), so he often daydreams of thrilling adventures involving her. He wistfully looks at her photo on eHarmony, but hesitates to try to connect with her, either on the site or at the office where he sees her every day. LIFE is going through a transition from print to an exclusively on-line journal. The cover for the last print edition is to come from a set of negatives that O'Connell has sent Mitty. It so happens that it, No. 25, is the only one of the set that is missing. The package that the negatives came in also included a leather wallet that O'Connell had inscribed for Mitty to express his thanks for his devotion through the years to facilitating his work. Mitty tries to contact the photographer, but he proves unreachable.

Now in real life, our hero would have simply reported the loss and continued the search, or the editors would have chosen a different photo, but then we would not have the exciting globe-circling series of adventures that prove as exciting as any of Mitty's daydreams. The excuse for this departure from reality is Ted Hendricks (Adam Scott), the newly arrived transition manager who takes an instant dislike to Mitty, demeaning him at virtually every encounter. Mitty cannot admit to the loss, and so he keeps putting off with excuses the boss's demand to produce the photo. From studying the extant negatives, Mitty deduces that O'Connell is in Greenland, and so he soon finds himself there involved with a drunken helicopter pilot and emboldened by a daydream in which Carol sings David Bowie's song "Space Oddity."\*

His adventures include his trying to catch up with his quarry on a ship, and then take him to Iceland where his childhood skate boarding skill comes in handy as a volcano erupts. But, failing to find O'Connell in Greenland or Iceland, he returns to Manhattan where Hendricks, finally learning the truth, fires him for losing the negative. How our now seasoned traveler manages at last to catch up with the missing photographer (in the Himalayas searching for the rare snow

leopard) and the missing negative, as well as winning the heart of Carol, makes for exciting, even rewarding, viewing.

The magazine's motto—"To see the world, things dangerous to come to, to see behind walls, draw closer, to find each other and to feel. That is the purpose of life"—describes well what Joseph Campbell called the "Hero's Journey" as we witness the meek Walter transitioning from hapless day dreamer to a take charge adult. The motto is well worked into the background of a couple of the shots as Walter sets out on his trek, providing far more depth and insight into life than the 1947 screwball comedy. Despite what so many critics have written, this almost overlooked film is a delightful family film—young viewers will enjoy the heroine's young son and the related skate boarding sequences, as well as the day dreams (who of us has not envisioned ourselves engaged in heroic pursuits when young?).

Better yet, the film provides the opportunity to talk about how our own hero's journey is enriched by companions along the way. In this instance Carol's singing the song, and even more the customer service rep at eHarmony Todd (Patton Oswalt) who goes beyond duty to help Mitty update his colorless profile so that he might obtain a "wink" from Carol, who also has placed her profile on the service. Everywhere that Mitty goes, Todd is calling him to offer his help and encouragement. Mitty's mom (Shirley MacLaine) proves a key support because in her love for her son she saves an item he tossed out. And above all, is O'Connell, an acclaimed photojournalist who realizes that his success is made possible by unheralded persons such as Mitty. His humility and loyalty are beautifully borne out by the ending of the film when Carol and Walter look upon the cover, the photo for which had been so elusive. Moving beyond our daydreams by taking on responsibility for our lives is the theme of both versions, but far more artfully presented in screenwriter Steve Conrad's version of James Thurber's short story.

Hopefully more people will discover this little gem when it is released on DVD and streaming video. If it is still playing at your theater, see it there because of the truly beautiful scenery best appreciated on a giant screen.

\* There is a visually awesome version of the [song on You Tube](#) recorded by Commander Chris Hadfield on board the International Space Station

*This is but part of the review. A set of questions designed to help an individual, or better, a group, explore the many issues raised by the film will be included in the January issue of the journal Visual Parables. Find out how you can subscribe in The Store and gain access not only to this full review, but hundreds of others as well, including film program ideas for the church and civil holidays.*