

The Meddler (2016)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 40 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 4; Language 5; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.

Proverbs 31:20

Of all the mothers that Susan Sarandon has played through the years, Marnie Minervini is one of the most interesting and entertaining—and she deserves the label of “meddler.” I suspect that long before her beloved husband died she was constantly giving out advice to all who would listen, including their daughter Lori (Rose Byrne). When their daughter had left Manhattan to pursue her screenwriting career in Los Angeles, her parents had followed her—and I would bet it was not the father who had initiated the move. Marnie’s story could easily have been told as a hilarious parody, a big screen summation of all of those interfering sit-com mothers, but writer/director Lorene Scafaria refuses to go that route, giving us instead a warm dramedy that aims for both heart and head, and scores a bulls eye. (Or should it be “eyes”?)

When Lori plans to fly back to Manhattan to supervise the taping of her TV pilot she rejects Marnie’s offer to go with her as her assistant. There leaves no doubt that she would like to put as much distance as possible between herself and her meddling mom—at least for a while. With no daughter to drop in on, usually unannounced, Marnie is bored. Her husband has left her financially well off, so she does not have to work outside the home. But her very upper class house and

garden are not enough to occupy her, so she volunteers at a hospital where she befriends a mute old woman (Jo Jordan). At the Apple store where she seeks help in using her new device she engages the young associate Freddy (Jerrod Carmichael) in conversation. Seeing that he is intelligent but lacks a college degree, she advises him to go for more education, even if it means taking night courses. She also shows up (with her usual bag of bagels in hand) at the door of Lori's best friend Jillian (Cecily Strong) because she has learned that the young mother is in need of babysitting help. And of course, the little daughter takes an immediate liking to Marnie.

As these three relationships develop we see that Marnie's care for others grows, almost exponentially. Upon her return to the Apple store Freddy tells her he has taken her advice and enrolled in a night course. When he says that he will be using public transportation because he has no car, she volunteers, and then insists on driving him the two or three nights a week to his class. From Jillian she learns of her wish that she had been able to have a formal wedding rather than a small private one. But her spouse is also a woman, so this was impossible years ago. Marnie offers to foot the bill for the dream event, aboard a large yacht no less. During the preparations for the ceremony she also dispenses advice to the bridesmaids, who also become impressed with her wisdom and generosity. Marnie is a meddler, but one with a lot of good common sense, and the generosity and the means to follow up on her suggestions.

Through a roundabout but funny incident with Freddy and his brother Marnie makes the acquaintance of retired police officer Zipper (J.K. Simmons). She agrees to take a ride on his motorcycle (he corrects her by saying "It's not a motorcycle, it's a Harley"), and thus the two of them enjoy a nightlong drive and stops along the beach. (This delights Jillian when she hears about it.) Zipper confesses that he has not been a good father, his daughter no longer wanting to have any contact with him. Marnie, of course, offers advice, saying

he should keep trying, even though she hangs up on his calls.

Lori re-enters the picture when Marnie flies back to Manhattan to visit her on the set of her TV show. (One of the film's funny moments happens when at the airport security check-in Marnie answers that the purpose of her visit is to see her daughter "shoot a pilot"!))

Marnie again "meddles" when it becomes obvious that Lori's new boyfriend is not the one for her. She also visits her husband's Italian family, which reawakens the grief over his death that she had not pushed into the background. We see that the busyness of "meddling" has been her way of staving off the pain that grief brings. She learns that Lori too has not dealt well with their loss, the daughter in a very tender scene telling her she misses her father so much.

There is more, much more, including Marnie's frequent sessions with her therapist Diane (Amy Landecker); Jillian's lavish wedding which Marnie has made possible; a would be suitor pursuing her; and, of course, what to do about Zipper, who obviously would like to develop a relationship with her, but who had acquiesced when she had told him that it would not be possible.

Marnie's story reminds me of two other films screened fairly recently—*L'attesa* (*The Wait*) because the women in both films put off dealing with their grief in similar ways, though differing in details; and the delightful film *I'll See You in My Dreams* in which Blythe Danner also plays an older woman who finds that romance is still possible at an advanced age. It's so good to see films that take older people seriously, rather than playing them for comic effect.

Yes, Marnie is a meddler, but her advice is given not to prove her own superiority, but always out of a genuine concern for others. I was reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's view of Christ as "the man for others," providing the pattern of an "other

directed lifestyle” for those who would follow him. We don’t know about Marnie’s religious views, but somehow she has become a person who is always there for others, her advice backed up by her actions, and in the case of Jillian, her money.

After writing the above the thought came to me that one reason why I so love this character is that I married a “Marnie.” My wife is always striking up conversations with store clerks, learning about their lives and likes. Like Marnie, she is a good listener. And a caring one in that she offers good advice, sometimes even cooking hints when she talks with a stranger in the produce or meat department at our grocery store. And almost every trip finds her walking up to a woman who has left her purse untended in the baby seat of a grocery cart and warning her to be more careful, lest someone might snatch it. The world is so much better off, thanks to such meddlers!

How daughter Lori comes to understand and accept her mother makes for a delightful movie-going experience. Marnie too seems to have learned by the end of the film that she needs to observe some boundaries when dealing with her offspring. An adult group could have a great time discussing this woman and her “meddling.” Might she be like the wife and mother described at the end of the book of Proverbs?

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the June issue of VP.