

Miss Sloane and *All We Had*: Aiming at American life

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Miss Sloane, directed by John Madden, screenplay by Jonathan Perera; *All We Had*, directed by Katie Holmes, screenplay by Josh Boone, based on the novel by Annie Weatherwax

Miss Sloane

Not too many audience members are likely to disagree with the lead character in John Madden's new movie, *Miss Sloane*, when she proclaims, "Our system is rotten ... It rewards rats." Elizabeth Sloane (Jessica Chastain), a top Washington, D.C. lobbyist, is describing the cesspool known as Capitol Hill. The film presents itself as something of an attack on the rich and powerful, using the issue of gun control as its central axis.

Overall, however, the British-born Madden (*Shakespeare in Love*, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*) has created a narrowly focused and somewhat fantastical view of the ruthless, mercenary world of political lobbying.

Chastain's Elizabeth is a legendary political strategist working for the prestigious consulting firm of Cole, Kravitz & Waterman. Although unscrupulous, she refuses to represent a National Rifle Association-type outfit intent on convincing or browbeating women into supporting its efforts to defeat a bill before the US Senate that would require background checks into those purchasing firearms.

Her boss, George Dupont (Sam Waterston), has the deep pockets of the pro-gun association in his sights and threatens Elizabeth with dismissal if she does not agree to head up a campaign that will counter the

arguments of gun control organizations, such as "Mothers for a Safer America." The latter's constituency is to be targeted with pitches like "guns [are] tools of female empowerment."

But the top-notch "conviction lobbyist" [i.e., someone who actually believes in the cause or organization he or she is representing] is soon approached by a smaller, rival firm, Peterson Wyatt, run by Rodolfo Schmidt (Mark Strong). Schmidt is working to ensure the passage of the gun control legislation. Elizabeth resigns from Dupont's company, taking most of her acolytes with her, but leaving behind her most cherished protégé, Jane Molloy (Alison Pill), who is unwilling to jump ship and commit possible career suicide. Elizabeth also leaves behind Pat Connors (Michael Stuhlbarg), a relentless and bitter foe.

At her new job, Elizabeth is taken with a talented colleague, Esme Manucharian (Gugu Mbatha-Raw), and tries to initiate the more principled Esme into her seedy winning game. The former knows no moral or ethical boundaries in the prosecution of her Machiavellian strategy. Elizabeth even operates her own surveillance unit, whose equipment includes remote control cockroaches capable of audio/visual transmission!

As the lobbying wars heat up, *Miss Sloane* goes back and forth in time. It eventually completes the sequence that ties things together, in which Elizabeth pleads the Fifth Amendment before a Senate ethics hearing spearheaded by Senator Ron Sperling (John Lithgow). The hearing concerns Elizabeth's possible misconduct as a member of what one lawyer calls "the most morally bankrupt profession since faith healing." Will she be the victim of her own moral bankruptcy or the victimizer of those more morally bankrupt than she?

Miss Sloane's pace is rigorous and the film, while taut and occasionally entertaining, seems to revel far more than is healthy in its half-woman, half-machine of a heroine. In general, very little about Chastain's Elizabeth is realistic or believable. She operates indefatigably at top speed, is always flawlessly attired and coiffed, agilely maneuvers on spike-like stilettos and pays for sex to avoid having a personal life. Like an android, she has been invented for the purpose of dirty-tricking the dirty tricksters—and, in this case, apparently approvingly invented by the filmmakers, whose own politics, one suspects, tends toward tame, ineffectual liberalism.

In blasting the reactionary pro-gun promoters (self-proclaimed guardians of the Second Amendment), *Miss Sloane* sidesteps the fact that significant sections of the American ruling elite view gun control as a means of expanding police powers and the ability of the authorities to keep tabs on the population. Moreover, the film's depiction of greed and malfeasance in the political arena, sharp and grim as it is, is largely superficial and falls far short of a much more advanced and dangerous reality.

All We Had

Actress Katie Holmes makes her directorial debut with *All We Had*, based on the 2014 eponymous novel by Annie Weatherwax.

Holmes plays the impoverished, vodka-drinking Rita Carmichael, who with her 14-year-old daughter Ruthie (Stefania LaVie Owen), lives and travels in a broken-down station wagon. Set in the days leading up to the 2008 crash, Holmes' film is well-intentioned but fairly primitive. Dreaming of a better life for her daughter, Rita survives by her wits and her body ("My mom was better at loving men than choosing them"). She explains to Ruthie that it is entirely within their rights to steal from people who "have jobs and houses."

The pair eventually get stranded near a diner and enjoy kindnesses from its owner (Richard Kind) and his remarkable transgender niece Pam (Eve Lindley). *All We Had* does not pay much attention to either plot continuity or consistency. Although real estate

swindling comes into play, Rita and Ruthie's fate oddly improves as everything else goes into an economic tailspin.

Even more oddly, teeth seem to be important in *All We Had*, and Rita's toothless smile is repaired as easily as is her homelessness. In fact, at one point, Ruthie, who has previously known nothing but acute deprivation, bizarrely challenges her mother to "stop living this suburban lie!"

Holmes should be commended for wanting to spotlight the condition of the homeless and indigent, but her distance from this population is too great and her artistic skill too limited at this point to save her film from its amateurishness.



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