

I Care A Lot: Social predators of the elderly

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Written and directed by J Blakeson

I Care A Lot, the latest film by J Blakeson (*The Disappearance of Alice Creed, The 5th Wave*), now available for streaming, is a black comedy in part about the abuse and exploitation of the elderly by a predatory scammer who pretends in smarmy fashion to “care a lot.”

As the film opens, Marla Grayson (Rosamund Pike) sets the tone by addressing the audience, on whom she looks down with Nietzschean contempt.

“I used to be like you,” Pike’s Grayson asserts, “thinking that working hard and playing fair would lead to success and happiness. It doesn’t. Playing fair is a joke invented by rich people to keep the rest of us poor. And I’ve been poor. It doesn’t agree with me. ‘Cause there’s two types of people in this world: the people who take ... and those getting took. Predators and prey. Lions and lambs. My name is Marla Grayson and I’m not a lamb. I am a f_____ lioness.”

While she narrates, we see a Mr. Feldstrom (Macon Blair) storm his way into an assisted living facility to find his mother, who was placed there by Grayson. He is forcibly barred by security from seeing her and ends up in court.

Feldstrom protests to the judge his mother was taken without her consent. “She’s my mother. I should be able to see her whenever I want. She doesn’t need to be in a care facility. She doesn’t need a court-appointed guardian.” Feldstrom goes on to protest that Grayson took his mother and then auctioned off his mother’s house, car and personal belongings, out of which proceeds Grayson paid herself.

In the end, Grayson bars Feldman from seeing his own mother. “It’s a goddamn nightmare. She has kidnapped my mother!,” he shouts at her.

Grayson responds to his desperate pleas with phony sympathy. She contends the woman “couldn’t cope on her own” and that a doctor had urged immediate action

because of her dementia. Grayson goes on to destroy Feldstrom’s character. “I have no skin in the game,” she concludes her case, adding, hypocritically, “caring, sir, is my job, it’s my profession.” The feckless judge sides with Grayson.

This is what Grayson does. She scams elderly people, cutting them off from their loved ones and ruthlessly stealing their homes and assets.

The opening scenes of the film are perhaps the strongest in depicting a social order that exploits the old and vulnerable for profit in nursing home facilities and by other means, legal and illegal. Feldstrom grows enraged, as he sees his mother taken advantage of and abused, and his anger speaks to more widespread sentiments. Millions despise the current crop of social climbers and swindlers who blight America.

Unfortunately, the plot quickly becomes more absurd and somewhat tedious.

Grayson’s next target is an elderly woman named Jennifer Peterson (Dianne Wiest), who she conspires to cheat out of her money with the help of Dr. Karen Amos (Alicia Witt). The corrupt doctor wants a piece of the profits in exchange for falsely claiming that Jennifer suffers from dementia. Grayson moves fast, arriving at Peterson’s home with a court order and immediately moving the bewildered woman to an assisted living facility, whose property manager Sam Rice (Damian Young) is in on the crooked scheme as well.

Grayson’s girlfriend and business partner, Fran (Eliza González), returns to Peterson’s home and ransacks the woman’s possessions. Bonds, gold, jewelry and “millions of dollars’ worth of diamonds” eventually turn up.

Unfortunately for Grayson, the elderly woman she has picked on this time happens to be the mother of a Russian gangster named Roman Lunyov (Peter Dinklage). Lunyov gets wind of what has happened and

has his lawyer (Chris Messina) offer Grayson the alternatives of accepting \$150,000 to release his mother or going to court. Marla asks for millions, which ends the negotiations. However, once in court the lawyer cannot prove he's Peterson's legal representative.

The rest of the narrative devolves into a violent cat-and-mouse game between Grayson and Lunyov.

When Lunyov has Marla in his hands at one point, she tells him that "to make it in this country, you need to be brave. And stupid and ruthless and focused. Because playing fair, being scared, that gets you nowhere. ... I wanna be very... fucking rich. And my bet is that \$10 million, that's not such a big deal for you. But for me, that's a start. That's enough to be able to use money as a weapon, like a bludgeon, the way real rich people do. That's what I want."

Later, Marla gains the upper hand on Lunyov. He suggests they go into business together.

"I propose we create a monster," he explains, "a nationwide guardianship corporation, with you as CEO and co-owner. Use my money, use your... skills. Destroy the competition. Take control of the entire market. ... Not just one company, a corporation with 80 different companies, all registered offshore, charging each other invoices, burying profit. A real estate arm, a legal arm, a training arm, a medical arm, a pharmaceutical arm. ... With hundreds of thousands of wards in our care. That way, you win. But I win too. And we make each other billions of dollars. Legally. Mostly." The film registers a certain amount of insight into the current state of financial affairs.

Various twists and turns ensue.

I Care A Lot is perhaps at its most interesting at the beginning and the end. Too much of the middle section is an absurd muddle. The acting by Pike and Dinklage, both talented performers, is strong and amusing at times. The cinematography is appealing with a warm yellow tone throughout that adds a slightly gloomy mood to the sociopathic nihilism of Grayson's character.

Most of the characters are extremely dislikeable. However, the director's attitude to Grayson and Lunyov is somewhat ambiguous. Ultimately, Blakeson condemns Grayson and the nouveau riche, but he flirts with making them sympathetic along the way. He hasn't clearly worked out his attitude toward the characters in an artistically convincing manner.

Nonetheless, the present state of social inequality has clearly factored into the director's attitudes, as some of the dialogue cited above indicates, however weakly rendered in artistic form and content.

There is a certain critique of identity politics here as well. The notion that the parasitic capitalist class might be less venal and exploitative if only there were more minorities or diverse "boss" ladies and LGBTQIA+ leaders in the executive boardroom takes a hit. Grayson's character, who has a touch of Hillary Clinton about her, with her garish pants suits, is just as ruthless (and murderous) an exploiter and social parasite as the rest of the top one percent.

Perhaps the strongest aspect of *I Care A Lot* is its representation of the exploitation of the elderly and their families in the United States. The COVID-19 global pandemic has put this into sharp relief with the untimely deaths of thousands of older and retired workers. More than 15,000 New York nursing home residents have died from COVID-19, a disaster that was covered up by the Democratic administration of Andrew Cuomo.

Even before the pandemic, the average cost per month at a nursing home in the US was over \$8,365 and a retiring couple could expect to spend over \$280,000 on health care. Over 70 percent of nursing homes in the US are run on a for-profit model, with finance capitalists backing many chain operations.

Such a predatory system deserves to be condemned and replaced with one that meets the needs of the elderly with dignity. Unfortunately, *I Care A Lot* barely scratches the surface of this subject artistically, and by and large not terribly well.



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