Four Good Days: A drama of the opioid epidemic

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Directed by Rodrigo García; screenplay by García and Eli Saslow

Four Good Days is a sensitive, honest film about the devastating impact of the opioid epidemic on families throughout the US. The work is a fictionalized version of events in the life of a woman from Farmington Hills, Michigan. Her story was first told by Eli Saslow in a *Washington Post* piece headlined "How's Amanda? A Story of Truth, Lies and an American Addiction."

Saslow is the co-screenwriter with director Rodrigo García (*Albert Nobbs*), the son of famed Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez.

The film follows the emotional journey of 31-year-old Margaret "Molly" Wheeler (Mila Kunis). In the first scene, Molly struggles to open the front door of her mother's modest ranch-style home in what could be any working class town in America. Her mother Deb (Glenn Close) has changed the locks to prevent Molly from coming in and robbing her—again—to buy drugs.

On the doorstep, a ragged-looking Molly begs for a place to stay while she detoxes from heroin. Having been through countless experiences of this character with her daughter over the previous decade, the older woman coldly refuses to allow Molly inside the house, "The deal was you would not come back until you were clean." Deb shuts the door on a still protesting Molly. "If you are looking for sympathy, you won't find any here," her mother insists.

The icy greeting, of course, is only a facade. Deb is clearly shaken and concerned. Unbeknownst to Molly, Deb spends the whole night watching over her daughter from a kitchen window. The next morning, Deb agrees to take Molly in, on condition that she first detoxes in a women's center for three days.

Upon Molly's release from the center, a doctor tells her and Deb about a powerful new drug treatment labeled an opioid antagonist that blocks the patient from getting high from opioids for an entire month. There is just one caveat: the patient must be sober for a full week before receiving the treatment. That is, in order to qualify, Molly has to stay sober for another four days.

The rest of the film follows Molly and her mother as they struggle to keep her clean until she can receive the shot.

Four Good Days has largely been met with a collective yawn from the critics. On Rotten Tomatoes, the film review aggregator, it holds an approval rating of just 51 percent based on 74 "Top Critics." A *New York Post* reviewer terms the story "well worn," while another from the *Tribune News* complains that the film's ending offered more questions than answers.

The lead comment from Rotten Tomatoes' "Top Critics," by *Indiewire*'s Ryan Lattanzio, laments the fact that the film did not sufficiently vilify Molly's mother: "Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this shallow movie is left unexplored: why doesn't Deb look in the mirror at her role in Molly's addiction?"

Contrary to the complaints of the critics, perhaps the greatest strength of *Four Good Days* is its nuanced and compassionate attitude toward all its characters. Each person is complex, with strengths and weaknesses, regrets and guilt. While some characters are presented with more or less admirable attributes, no one is scapegoated as the "villain"—and rightly so. No single figure in the film is ultimately responsible for Molly's addiction and the havoc it has wrought on her family.

While the story of an ordinary girl, in an ordinary family setting, caught up in the throes of addiction may bore the critics, it has met with a significantly warmer response from viewers. Rotten Tomatoes' "Audience Score" registers an 81 percent approval rating.

Drug addiction is a mass phenomenon in the US, with an estimated 31 million users, almost 10 percent of the population. Tens of millions more suffer from the scourge

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as family members and friends. Great numbers of people will make an emotional connection to one or another character in the film, who are all profoundly influenced by Molly's addiction.

The audience eventually comes to learn that Deb, who found herself in an unhappy marriage, left the family when Molly was in high school.

In a particularly emotional scene, Molly explains to her mother, "I thought you couldn't stand to be around us, around me," referring to how her mother's departure affected her. Deb is clearly hurt. She takes her time trying to make Molly understand how difficult her marriage and life were for her to endure. In the end, Deb calmly tells her daughter, "I am so sorry for causing you so much pain. But I can't apologize for trying to survive. I just can't. I would be lying."

She pauses before anxiously asking Molly, "You think it's my fault that you are an addict?" Molly breaks eye contact with her mother, looks down and shakes her head, no.

Later, we meet Molly's father, Dale (Sam Hennings), who has remarried and refuses to interact with his daughter until she is drug-free. At this point, Molly has suddenly gone missing. Deb is in a wild state of anger and concern. She shows up at her ex-husband's to berate him for not phoning Molly. The two exchange harsh words, blaming each other for Molly's addiction. When it looks like they may come to blows, they stop themselves, exchanging apologetic and perhaps even sympathetic looks in a moment of silence before parting ways.

We also learn more about Molly herself, a straight A student who never made it through high school. She has two kids who live with their father. Molly no longer has custody. Her addiction started when she was 17. She hurt her knee and was prescribed 75 oxycontin and never had a refill denied. Her addiction, like so many, spiraled into heroin.

Addressing high school students in a health and wellness class, she explains, "I have degraded myself for drugs in ways … in ways that you don't want to know." One student interrupts Molly, boasting that she would never let herself "get that far" into addiction. Molly responds, "I have woken up every morning for the last couple years and said that this is it. Today I am not going to get high. And an hour later I am meeting up with my dealer to get high." Clearly struggling to continue, Molly stresses, "I fail every single day."

Molly is consumed by guilt. While she may lash out at times at her mother and others, it is clear that, above all, she blames herself.

Four Good Days grapples constantly with the question of responsibility. The characters are collectively burdened with a sea of regret that stem from their love for Molly and their desire to help.

What if more counseling had been available at school? What if Deb had remained in her unhappy marriage? Or if her father had just contacted his daughter?

Perhaps things would have turned out differently, but more than likely not.

Instead, the audience is left with a sense that something more fundamental is wrong here. While personal decisions certainly can make a difference in immediate outcomes, none of the enormous problems involved in the opioid epidemic can be solved on an individual basis.

Human beings undergo particular experiences and have different physical and psychological susceptibilities. However, the mass upsurge in opioid addiction points toward a broader cause, the coalescence of many ills hammering at people's lives—inequality, poverty, low wages, unemployment, homelessness and a general lack of confidence in the future that afflicts a considerable section of the population.

What stands out so starkly, and painfully, in *Four Good Days* is that Molly's family is left entirely alone to deal with these immense social problems. Such a burden exacts a staggering emotional toll.

However, as helpless and isolated as the characters—or, rather, the real human beings they are meant to represent—may feel, they are certainly not alone. The wrenching story of Molly and her family is currently being played out millions of times across the US, and globally.

Over the past year, as governments around the world shoveled trillions of dollars into the financial markets and giant corporations, while leaving masses of people to suffer through the pandemic, the opioid epidemic has only worsened.

Four Good Days leaves wider questions untouched. Its narrow focus is a limitation. However, the film's perceptive and frank treatment of addicts and their loved ones is certainly worth commending.

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