

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Love revisited: February films

By T. Rob Brown

Last month, we were introduced to *Argylle* and *Madame Web* and got to take an intimate look into the life of world-famous reggae star Bob Marley.

To begin with *Argylle*, I have to say that I'm a sucker for movies about writers. I love delving into films such as *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), *Adaptation* (2002), *Misery* (1990), and *Secret Window* (2004)—just to name a few of the many films on the subject.

As soon as I saw the first trailer, I looked forward to it. The premise is spot-on and interesting: a writer discovers through some weird twist that the characters from her novels are real people. Bryce Dallas Howard (*Jurassic World* franchise) plays that author—Elly Conway.

In a star-studded cast that crosses the line between the fictional world of the novels and the real world of spy intrigue, Elly is joined by the real spy Aidan (Sam Rockwell). In a state of excitement and adrenaline, she begins to believe—through flashes—that Aidan is her own fictional character, *Argylle* (Henry Cavill).

The story runs through various plot twists and turns—as a good spy thriller should—before you realize what's really going on. But even when you think you have it figured out, there's another twist around the corner. Where it stops, nobody but screenwriter Jason Fuchs knows.

Along the way, the film is filled with laughs via comedic moments and crazy situations. Rockwell is known for his comedic takes on lots of characters, going all the way back to Zaphod Beeblebrox from *The*

Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (2005) and Guy from *GalaxyQuest* (1999). He also hits home runs with his dramatic roles like *Moon* (2009) and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) where he whistled the song, *The Streets of Laredo*.

Howard, who is both a talented actress and director (*Mandalorian*, *Book of Boba Fett*), charms the screen in this film—as all sides of her character are revealed. She is the central viewpoint character, despite the film's title, as we see the events of the film unroll mostly from her perspective. She also fans the flames of romantic interest in the film.

As if the aforementioned cast weren't star-power enough, the film brings in former professional wrestler John Cena into the fictional world of the novels as Argylle's sidekick, who offers some needed muscle. Then the casting director doubled down by bringing in screen legend Samuel L. Jackson to sweeten the pot. Jackson's role wasn't one of the biggest from his extensive career, but it was an important one for the film. I'll never say no to Jackson's presence in a film—he tends to be a big-name draw.

I saw this film twice because it's quite a spectacle of cinema, with lots of stunts and visual effects. I feel like watching it for the second time, after you already know all the plot twists, is still an enjoyable journey. I also caught things the second time that I missed on the first—such as little clues that might have given away some of those twists and turns.

Hopefully no felines were harmed during the making of this film.

Directed by Matthew Vaughn, *Argylle* (2023), Rated PG-13, stars Howard, Rockwell, Cavill, Cena, Dua Lipa, Sofia Boutella, Ariana DeBose, Catherine O'Hara, and Jackson. It runs for 2 hours and 19 minutes. It received a rotten 33% on the Tomatometer yet a 72% audience score, plus a 6.0/10 on IMDb. I give it one thumb up for originality, making me laugh, and its plot twists.

In Sony's recent Marvel Comics film, *Madame Web*, we're introduced to the title character, Cassandra Webb (Dakota Johnson). It's believed this one may be set in the same Spider-Verse as the *Venom* films (2018, 2021) and *Morbius* (2022). The as-of-yet untitled *Venom 3* film is slated for a Nov. 8 release.

Chalk up another failure for Sony Pictures Entertainment's live-action Spider-Verse.

When will the powers-that-be at Sony realize we're not all that interested in films that focus on villains or side characters—especially when the stories aren't all that well written? Sure, the first *Venom* film was pretty decent. It still pales in comparison to most of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films of its time. The second film failed in one key area: Carnage is one of the most sadistic villains in all of Marvel. He is evil incarnate. Anything less than an R rating and tons of violence, just doesn't do that character justice.

Sure, I know Sony's trying to get teens and kids into the cinema seats, but as someone who's read *Maximum Carnage* (1993), the film fails to portray Carnage in all his villainous prime.

Even the MCU's *The Marvels*, which has been classified as a box office failure by many fans of the genre, at least hit 62% on the Tomatometer and an 82% audience score. *Madame Web* is somewhere off in the distance below that. At least the MCU powers-that-be focused their story on Captain Marvel and Ms. Marvel, who are major characters in the comics.

Despite that, Sony CEO Tom Rothman and Marvel Studios President and Marvel Entertainment Chief Creative Officer Kevin Feige have different opinions on who should helm the forthcoming MCU film Spider-Man 4 with Tom Holland. Yep, they're at it again, according to an article on [fandomwire.com](https://www.fandomwire.com) from Feb. 20. Rothman told *Deadline* in a 2022 interview that he hoped to keep the whole team of director Jon Watts, Holland, and Zendaya together.

Feige, on the other hand, said he hoped for a fresh creative team to take charge as Holland's Spider-Man "embraces a more grounded approach ... offer an opportunity to reshape his future within the franchise," the article indicated. Perhaps Feige referred to Watts' trilogy at its end and the speculation that Drew Goddard (*Daredevil* director, *The Martian* screenwriter) might assume the helm.

I'm not saying that Madame Web doesn't have her place in the Spider-Verse—she most certainly does—but I'd never plan an entire film around her character. She's not the anchor that franchises are built on. Without key characters like Peter Parker, Miles Morales, Gwen Stacey (Ghost Spider), Miguel O'Hara, or any of the other numerous major Spider-People, this film just doesn't draw fans to the seats. Rumors of Andrew Garfield or Tobey Maguire making an appearance were not true—it's not the proper place in time for either of their Spider-Man characters to exist.

What this film does offer is an interesting new connection for the source of the special spiders that led to the creation of all those Spider-People. The villain of the story isn't all that powerful or compelling—he's basically a watered-down evil Spider-Man who can't shoot webs. Whoopy-do!

Again, I plead to Sony, as I did online several years ago: put me in charge of the creative team for your Sony live-action Spider-Verse and we'll see some major changes for the better. How many people really want to see a Kraven-led film without Spider-Man? How many people really want to see a Sinister Six film without Spider-Man? To me, it seems like some of these choices should be a lot more obvious than what Sony makes. I'm not talking about fan service here—I'm talking about powerful drama, comic-related moments, proper character utilization, and really cool fight scenes. It's all about remembering what comics do best and translating that to the silver screen, relying on the strength of filmmaking visuals.

Maybe someday Sony will get it figured out, but they haven't yet (outside of the animated films).

Madame Web, Rated PG-13, written and directed by S.J. Clarkson, stars Johnson, Sydney Sweeney, Celeste O'Connor, Isabela Merced, Tahar Rahim, Emma Roberts, and Adam Scott. At 1 hour and 56 minutes, it received a rotten 13% on the Tomatometer and a low 56% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 3.8/10 at IMDb. I give it one thumb down.

For the final film of this issue, we're looking at the biopic *Bob Marley: One Love*. This one tells the story of one of Jamaica's most famous people aside from athlete Usain Bolt.

At the start, we were greeted by an introduction from Ziggy Marley, son of the reggae legend and one of the producers of the film. It's nice to know when a film gets a nod from the family of the deceased star depicted in a biopic.

Bob Marley is one of those musicians who you just can't miss when you listen to classic rock and related genres of music. Many of his hits ended up on U.S. radio stations as crossovers, mostly in the

1970s. Back in the '90s, I expanded my appreciation for his music beyond just what I heard on the radio growing up.

While I don't claim to be the biggest Marley expert, I definitely respect what he stood for, his sound, and the message he shared with the world. As a teenager, I had no idea all of the trouble Marley went through to get his music out there and to be a force of change and peace in Jamaica. This movie helped me understand more about his life and work than I previously knew.

I'm someone who appreciates the use of authentic languages/dialects in films—although Jamaicans speak English throughout the film, it's sometimes a bit difficult to understand, especially when they use a lot of Jamaican slang or expressions that we're not as familiar with in the U.S. There were parts of the film when I felt I needed subtitles. I felt the same way about *Snatch* (2000).

Kingsley Ben-Adir (*Barbie, Secret Invasion*) plays Marley quite well—a very likeable portrayal, focused on what made the original a music legend. It's personable and he makes you root for Marley through his difficulties.

Bob Marley: One Love, Rated PG-13, written and directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green, stars Ben-Adir, Lashana Lynch, James Norton, and Tosin Cole. At 1 hour and 47 minutes, it received a rotten 43% on the Tomatometer yet a high 93% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 6.6/10 at IMDb. I give it one thumb up for the emotional moments and the great soundtrack.

As for the near future, I'm looking forward to *Dune: Part Two* (March 1). *Kung Fu Panda 4* hits cinemas on March 8. *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire* comes out March 22. *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* shows on March 29. *Monkey Man* looks like a mix between *John Wick* (2014) and *Iron Monkey* (1993). *The Fall Guy* releases on May 3. *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes* hits cinemas and IMAX on May 10. *IF* releases on May 17 and *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* on May 24.

"The show must go on."