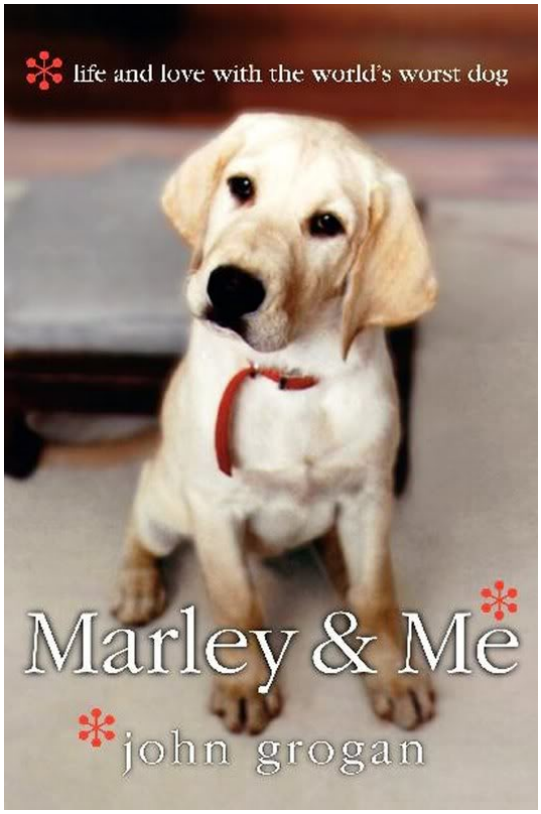
For three years now, the Mitch Man has been reviewing every film of note that hits the theaters for our readers, and does it as well as anyone out there. But he's been on a tough run as of late, as most of the new releases he's reviewed these past 3-4 months have been very shaky. That all changed with "Marley & Me", a film Mitch loved, and one he strongly recommends all pet owners get to the theaters to see. Happy New Year everyone!



The problem with most movies about dogs is that they make the canines out to be human. Even if the film doesn't take the cheap way out and have them "talking", then they still show them as completely human in their emotions, usually embossing them with near superhuman levels of courage, bravery, or strength.

But with "Marley & Me", we get to see something unique, and altogether enjoyable; a dog being a dog. And quite frankly; that's quite enough for most of us who are captivated by these loving, frustrating, hopelessly devoted creatures. "Marley & Me", stars a Yellow Labrador Retriever (a breed already ‘blessed' with boundless energy) playing the part of a wrecking ball on four legs. But it is not his antics that make this movie so heart-warming; it is how he is interwoven into the story of two people as they grow and evolve as a family (although his antics are absolutely hysterical).

Be warned, however, that is a movie for and about pet lovers. If you are the type of person who disdains pets of any kind...to put it plain and simple; you are not going to like this film.

Marley is not the centerpiece of the film. That role is assumed by Owen Wilson as real life journalist/columnist John Grogan. The film follows 13 years in Grogan's life, starting from his marriage to fellow Michigan writer Jenny and their relocation to Miami where they wrote for different local papers.

Jenny soon starts feeling the nesting urge, and begins hinting about wanting a baby. To counter this, John's horn-dog ace reporter best friend Sebastian urges him to get a puppy instead. So it's off to a farm to pick out an adorable Lab. "The females are $300, the males $275", states the proprietor as Jen cuddles an adorable bundle of fur. "But the one you're holding...you can have him for $200".

The reason for the "Clearance Sale Puppy" soon becomes clear. Marley is a nearly uncontrollable cyclone trashing about their small home, terrorizing the neighborhood, and wreaking havoc wherever he goes. But he's not a vicious or even aggressive dog in any sense of the words, so Jen and John continue to take the bad with the good.

"Bad with the good" is a recurring theme of the movie, as Marley is actually a walking (chewing) metaphor for John's life. He looks enviously at his hot-shot buddy Sebastian. Not necessarily at the way he chases (and catches) all kinds of gorgeous women, but more at the way Sebastian's "freedom" is allowing him to have the kind of professional success John craves. John wants to be the kind of investigative reporter that gets to fly down to Columbia to interview Pablo Escobar, but he has other obligations.

Those obligations soon include children as well. This is where the movie is most honest. For once, having a family isn't portrayed in one of the two options that

usually seem to be the only choices: As an idealistic view of perfection, and everyone's dream, or as a cause of unbearable unhappiness (even if temporary), leading to untold amounts of drama.

The Grogan family situation is portrayed marvelously, with the creators showing that it is possible to have a movie where the prospect of having a normal, healthy family life is shown in a completely positive light. At the same time, they avoid the 'too good to be true' problems that you often get with films showing a successful marriage. Jen's stress is real. When John listens to his boss (Alan Arkin, once again shining in every scene he's in) talk about post-partum depression, and then mentions that prospect to her, the frustration is palpable when Jen responds "I'm not depressed. I'm exhausted!"

Owen Wilson has never been one of my favorite actors. He seems too lazy, just trying to slide by on his charm and "aw shucks" demeanor. But here, he absolutely amazes as John Grogan. He completely nails the intricate layers of a good man who still takes years to finally realize that it's not all about having a Big Goal to go after; it's about leading a good life with those around you and being happy with what you are and what you are doing.

Jennifer Aniston has shown her acting ability before, most notably in "The Good Girl", but her acting choices (or opportunities) have been a bit poor of late. In "Marley & Me", she stands out for something more than just being almost as adorable as the little puppies. She exhibits true acting ability as a young woman content with the hard decision she made to give up work to concentrate full time on her family, but still as full of flaws as the next person. The chemistry between her and Wilson is excellent, and pushes this film higher than you would normally anticipate from this kind of light comedy.

Be warned that there will not be a dry eye in the house after the last reel. As I mentioned, this film covers thirteen years in the life of a family, including the beloved Family Pet, so I'm not considering this as a spoiler by mentioning it. But this is not an "Old Yeller" moment of tragedy. The filmmakers handle

the inevitable aging and passing of Marley in a touching, dignified manner; one that will deeply affect anyone in the audience who has faced that moment in the vet's office with a beloved pet who was always there to give unending examples of what the words "unconditional love" really mean.

It broke my heart to watch it, especially remembering myself in that position, and dreading the time in the too-near future when our own 11 year old Yellow Lab mix will probably be facing the same thing. But it also lifted my spirits, being reminded once again how wonderful these noble creatures are, and how lucky we humans are to have them in our lives.

My Rating - Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs)