

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*The Year of the Dog*]

A Women's Best Friend

By Steve Sailer

"THE YEAR OF THE DOG," with "Saturday Night Live" veteran Molly Shannon as a spinster secretary looking for love, sounds like just another romantic comedy, such as "The Truth about Cats and Dogs" or "Must Love Dogs." Yet this sympathetic portrayal of the making of an animal-rights activist/pest turns out to be one of the odder and more memorable movies of the year so far.

In recent years, the typical Hollywood filmmaker's career path has been first to write screenplays for others and then move on to directing. Not every verbalist, however, is an equally adept visualist. First-time director Mike White, screenwriter of "School of Rock" and "The Good Girl," is so unimaginative with images—he mostly just plunks his actors dead center in the frame and has them stare goggle-eyed into the camera—that his little quasi-comedy stumbles into a neo-Egyptian monumentality.

Fortunately, White has a strong cast, anchored by the disconcertingly intense Shannon, the diva of discomfort. Her Peggy is Shannon's "SNL" signature character Mary Katharine Gallagher, the Catholic schoolgirl with Asperger's Syndrome, grown a quarter century older and sadder but no wiser. Now 42, Shannon plays awkward Peggy without

makeup, every wrinkle in her delicate Irish skin exposed by the fluorescent office lighting.

Peggy's only friend besides her beagle, Pencil, is her fellow secretary, the contrastingly outgoing Layla (a scene-stealing Regina King, who was Cuba Gooding Jr.'s wife in "Jerry Maguire"). While black-white masculine friendships are far more common in cop movies and commercials than in daily life, Peggy and Layla's closeness is realistic: pink-collar working women enjoy the warmest interracial bonds of any class. Her black pal is conducting a publicly passionate affair with the office lothario, while Peggy displays the traditional Hibernian uneasiness over sex.

"The Year of the Dog" then introduces two disparate men into her life to make the point, a bit formulaically, that sexual and social attraction are often at odds. The older and less hormone-driven we get, the harder it is to find somebody of the opposite sex who fits the rut we've dug for ourselves.

One night, Peggy's beloved beagle gets into her neighbor's yard, eats some snail poison, and dies. To cheer her up, the construction worker next door, played by the currently omnipresent regular guy character actor John C. Reilly, invites her out to dinner. Layla is ecstatic that Peggy finally has a date. Unfortunately, he turns out to love hunting, which Peggy can't abide.

Then a handsome but effeminate man from the animal shelter offers her a vicious German shepherd that is otherwise doomed to be put down. A vegan, he instructs Peggy in the horrors of factory farms, and soon she's in love. Peter Sarsgaard, who normally plays strong, silent types like the sniper in "Jarhead" and Chuck Lane, the long-suffering

editor of Marty Peretz's *New Republic* in "Shattered Glass," portrays the pet person as a little too obviously gay—to everybody except Peggy, whose heart gets broken.

With men letting her down, she turns even more to dogs for consolation, becoming a strident PETA-style activist. Strikingly, the script shows her losing the arguments she starts. Peggy assumes, though, as most people do, that she gets out-debated not because she's wrong but because she's not glib enough.

She forges her boss's signature on a check to a farm animal rescue charity, adopts 15 dogs off death row at the pound, and ruins the fur coats of her insufferable sister-in-law. Peggy is on the path to being a crazy old lady with too many pets in her squalid house, but "The Year of the Dog" asks whether being an animal addict is worse than sane loneliness.

PETA fanatics are the one sort of progressive that everybody loves to look down upon. After Dutch immigration restrictionist Pim Fortuyn was gunned down in 2002, the European center-left establishment immediately proclaimed (wrongly, it turned out) that their vilification of anti-immigrationists had nothing to do with Fortuyn's murder. The assassin was just some animal-rights loony!

And yet, the animal-rights cause is likely to triumph partially. As the world gets richer, the worst abuses of factory farming will become less tolerable. Moreover, while we deplore Koreans' taste for dog, hard-headed Paul Johnson has suggested that our descendants won't understand how we complacently devoured the comparably intelligent pig. Too bad they're so tasty ... ■

Rated PG-13 for some suggestive references.

BOOKS

[*Rumsfeld: His Rise, Fall, and Catastrophic Legacy*, Andrew Cockburn, Scribner, 247 pages]

King of the Plastic Rambos

By Martin Sieff

"Good morning, good morning!"
the General said
When we met him last week on
our way to the line.
Now the men that he smiled at are
most of them dead
And we're cursing his staff for
incompetent swine.

REREADING SIEGFRIED SASSOON'S great poem of World War I, the sense is overwhelming that it was a vision of former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. His eerie, uncrackable arrogance and unwavering faith in his own genius have so far cost the lives of more than 3,000 American soldiers and maimed more than 22,000. But not the slightest hint of self-doubt or remorse intrudes. One is left with little doubt that he sleeps the sound sleep of the just every night.

Yet after six years in the limelight he so relished as supreme warlord of the global hyper-power, we know little about the real Rumsfeld. Andrew Cockburn, for more than 20 years one of the most magnificently politically incorrect mavericks of English-language journalism, has now rectified the incompetence, laziness, and plain servility of the mainstream American media with this invaluable new book. Lean and muscular, with not a sentence wasted, it documents old suspicions, strips away hoary myths, and reveals startling new knowledge.

Rumsfeld was supposed to have been a brilliant captain of industry who brought the driving efficiency and tower-

ing intellect of a successful CEO to the running of the U.S. Department of Defense. But in reality, Cockburn reveals, his business record was muddling and inept: he proved to be a byword for incompetent management. At first, his endless blaze of terse messages and dictates made thousands quiver, generating panic and chaos wherever they fluttered in the cavernous rings of the Pentagon. Then it dawned on the secretary's underlings that he never remembered to follow up on any of them.

Rumsfeld was sold by his myth-makers—and even believed himself—that he was a ruthless juggernaut, killing obsolete weapons programs and dragging the American Armed Services kicking and screaming into the 21st century. Instead, as Cockburn shows, when it came to taking on the generals and the military-industrial complex, Rummy was a toothless, clawless old teddy bear. The only major system scrapped during his six-year tenure under Bush was the Crusader heavy artillery gun. And Rumsfeld did not even have the interest or stomach to heft the axe. Responsibility fell to Paul Wolfowitz, who waffled endlessly before doing so.

Even Rumsfeld's supposed finest hour, his calm and commanding presence as a leader after a hijacked airliner crashed into the Pentagon on Sept. 11, the moment that truly "made" him in the eyes of America and gave him the towering reputation that freed him to wreak so much havoc in the years that followed, was the result of his serene ineptitude, not a cool-headed Caesar-style grasp of command.

Cockburn interviews eyewitnesses and security guards who accompanied Rumsfeld on that fateful morning and makes clear that the SecDef abandoned his command post at a key time during the crisis. He spent most of that fateful morning drafting rules of engagement for U.S. fighter pilots to deal with the hijacked airliners. "This was an irrelevant exercise for he did not complete and issue them until 1:00 p.m., hours after the last hijacker had died," the author writes.

Rumsfeld, the most micromanaging defense secretary in U.S. history, took no part whatsoever in directing the military when the attacks were actually in progress. "Later, when asked why he had taken no part in military operations that morning, Rumsfeld blithely insisted it was not his job," Cockburn notes. The nerve center of America's national defense that day was not in the hands of Douglas MacArthur redux but of Mr. Magoo.

Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld's chief deputy who was obsessed with conquering Iraq for his good friend Ahmad Chalabi but never with hunting down the actual perpetrators of the 9/11 atrocities, also shrivels under the merciless light of Cockburn's research. He was so feckless that he did not even realize that to keep 150,000 men in Iraq indefinitely actually meant tying up three times that number as the forces had to be rested, rotated, and prepared for their new tours of duty. Wolfowitz, Cockburn documents, was another cartoon figure—notorious for never being able to make a clear-cut decision. If Rumsfeld had the unrelenting self-regard of Mr. Magoo, Wolfowitz emerges from these pages more as Porky Pig, the stutter of indecision reducing to chaos everything he touched.

But this bungling in no way reduced Wolfowitz's contempt for the men in uniform he was charged with directing. "Where do all these stupid generals come from?" Cockburn cites the deputy secretary as asking.

Wolfowitz was fond of talking endlessly about the buzzword "maneuvers" without apparently realizing that many troops are required to carry them out. At one point before the invasion of Iraq, Cockburn writes, Wolfowitz and company seriously thought all that was needed to topple Saddam was 10,000-15,000 American troops.

Cockburn also performs a valuable service in showing how the scare tactics that so effectively hyped the negligible threat of Saddam Hussein developing new weapons of mass destruction were nothing more than a rerun on a larger