

It Ends with Us: The film, the Lively-Baldoni feud and the Los Angeles fires

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It Ends with Us is a drama about domestic violence, directed by Justin Baldoni and featuring Blake Lively and Baldoni himself. It is a largely contrived and simplistic film, with a few amusing touches. It is based on the 2016 best-selling novel by Colleen Hoover, who writes books in the romance and young adult fiction genres.

Events unfold predictably in *It Ends with Us*, with due attention paid to current affluent middle class moral sensibilities and tastes in fashion and decor. In reality, the film is largely a scaffolding for those sensibilities and tastes.

Lively plays Lily Bloom, the owner of an unusual, highly personalized flower shop. She meets a handsome neurosurgeon, Ryle (Baldoni), who turns out to have a violent temper. As a child, Bloom witnessed her father abuse her mother. We learn from other flashbacks that in high school she befriended and helped a homeless boy, Atlas, who later joined the US military.

Ryle retains his own tragic secret from childhood, which apparently accounts for his outbursts of anger. He semi-accidentally injures Lily on two occasions and assaults her on a third. Atlas (Brandon Sklenar), now an adult and the owner of an unusual, highly personalized *restaurant*, intervenes on Lily's behalf. She has a child and decides to separate from Ryle, supposedly bringing to a conclusion the cycle of domestic violence.

The film begins on a very self-conscious note, with Baldoni and Lively maneuvering around one another at length on a downtown Boston rooftop in what is intended to be an irresistible flirtatious manner. Fortunately, as noted, some traces of humor do occur later on. Jenny Slate as Alyssa adds a certain humanity.

The filmmakers would very much like to have their cake and eat it too. *It Ends with Us* wants to draw audience members in with attractive performers, witty repartee, picturesque settings and some degree of passion, and then teach them a lesson about spousal abuse. Much of the film feels manufactured, lacking in genuine spontaneity, organized to achieve a desired response.

Domestic violence is a serious social issue, but there is no genuine insight provided here; we simply see that certain damaged men act badly. But such abuse happens on an everyday basis even when there is no spectacular tragedy as has occurred in the case of Baldoni's character. If it is a generalized experience, it must have roots in the existing society and its structures and operations. Is it not a function of a brutal and backward social order, based on exploitation of one class by another, where the strong prey on the weak, and the weak often take it out on the even weaker?

Concretely, we also know from research that violence increases sharply in families affected by job loss and other economic hardships. Official American society at present, moreover, praises and practices

extreme violence and accepts mass death as the natural order of things, at home and abroad. These various phenomena communicate themselves to the more susceptible through complex, often subterranean means.

One of the more pernicious constructs in *It Ends with Us* is the character of the formerly homeless "Atlas Corrigan" (even the names ...!) now turned gourmet chef. Atlas was in the US Marines for eight years. We never learn in which part of the globe cursed with American military presence he was stationed. In any case, his troubled childhood and military training have somehow made him a perfect gentleman-former soldier, a chivalrous knight in shining armor (where is the ban on white, male saviors when we truly need it?). Romance, quasi-feminism, patriotism—*It Ends with Us* attempts to cover a number of bases.

The film has done well at the global box office, but it has largely been overshadowed by events.

In the first place, a bitter conflict has emerged between Baldoni and his supporters, including billionaire Steve Sarowitz, on the one hand, and Lively, husband Ryan Reynolds and their high-powered circles (reportedly including Taylor Swift), on the other. News of lawsuits and counter-suits, along with widely aired claims and counter-claims, have dominated the headlines of the tabloids and other media outlets for the past month. Each side claims the other is guilty of slander and efforts to destroy its opponents. The recent headlines have brought to the public eye a battle that was apparently raging behind the scenes for months.

The shooting of *It Ends with Us* began in May 2023, was interrupted by the writers and actors strike, and completed in early 2024. Rumors of friction between Lively and Baldoni appeared in the media in the summer of 2024. According to the *Hollywood Reporter* in August, a source noted that the rift between director and lead actress "dates back at least a year." The publication argued that after

the movie's release, social media users dug up cringeworthy, lighthearted interview snippets from Lively and criticized her cross-promotion of her new hair-care line given the film's domestic violence subject matter, while Baldoni has been accused of fostering an uncomfortable set that alienated Lively and the cast.

On December 20, 2024, Lively filed a complaint with the California Civil Rights Department, alleging that Baldoni had created a hostile work environment during the film's shooting and was guilty of

inappropriate sexual comments and instances of sexual harassment. The complaint also claimed that Baldoni and his associates retaliated against Lively by attempting to damage her reputation after she formally requested an end to his alleged harassment.

Always in the middle of such dirty scandals, the *New York Times*, on the following day, carried an account, “‘We Can Bury Anyone’: Inside a Hollywood Smear Machine,” essentially taking Lively’s side in the dispute. The article was co-authored by Megan Twohey, who helped initiate the #MeToo witch-hunt with an October 2017 piece alleging decades of sexual misconduct by producer Harvey Weinstein.

Baldoni came under pressure at this point. His talent agency WME dropped him. The actors union SAG-AFTRA issued a statement supporting Lively. Vital Voices, a group that works with “women leaders,” rescinded the award it was about to bestow on Baldoni, a self-proclaimed “male feminist,” and so forth.

Baldoni, however, has not precisely gone “gentle into that good night.” He and his lawyers filed a \$250 million lawsuit against the *Times*, contending that “in this vicious smear campaign orchestrated by Blake Lively” and company, the newspaper had “cowered to the wants and whims of two powerful ‘untouchable’ Hollywood elites, disregarding journalistic practices and ethics.” Lively then filed a federal suit against Baldoni on the basis of the same issues she had raised with the California Civil Rights Department.

Not to be outdone, on January 16, Baldoni’s legal team filed a \$400 million lawsuit against Lively, Reynolds and others, alleging that the actress and her husband had conspired to hijack *It Ends with Us* and concocted false accusations of sexual harassment to cover up their own misdeeds.

Baldoni, according to *People*, is suing on claims no less of

civil extortion, defamation, false light invasion of privacy, breach of implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing, intentional interference with contractual relations, intentional interference with prospective economic advantage, and negligent interference with prospective economic advantage.

It is impossible to determine the legal or ethical rights and wrongs of the vicious feud and mud-slinging, although the Lively camp’s attempt to revive the #MeToo campaign has an unconvincing and reactionary character. For his part, Baldoni is partnered with billionaire Sarowitz, the founder of Paylocity, a provider of cloud-based payroll and human capital management software solutions.

Hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars are at stake, along with the fate of various public relations firms and production companies, and the reputations of Baldoni, Lively, Reynolds and others. Both camps have extremely deep pockets and to this point neither has backed down. The possibility of settling out of court of course is always there, but the damage to the standing of major Hollywood figures will not easily be undone.

The vast sums of money in question are in inverse proportion to the significance of *It Ends with Us* and, frankly, the film personalities involved. Large egos and terrible degrees of self-centeredness, various lucrative and potentially lucrative business interests, access to and prominence in the celebrity limelight, these seem to be the elements driving this conflict.

The film industry has been the location of fierce disputes in the past,

but the most significant ones involved questions of principle: the struggle to unionize writers and others in the 1930s, led by left-wing forces, and later the labor battles in the immediate postwar years; the battle of Orson Welles with William Randolph Hearst over *Citizen Kane*; the campaign against Charlie Chaplin ignited by his socialist views; of course, the blacklisting of hundreds of film writers, directors, actors and others during the McCarthy period; the antitrust suits against the major studios; the battles between prominent actors (Bette Davis, Olivia de Havilland, etc.) and the studios over their virtually slave-like employment conditions, and so forth.

The vacuous character of the Lively-Baldoni warfare speaks to the largely barren state of mainstream filmmaking, dominated by conglomerates, billionaire CEOs and a handful of enormously wealthy performers whose lives and interests are very distant from the conditions of wide layers of the population.

For those with eyes to see, the ongoing conflict over *It Ends with Us* has itself been put into perspective by the devastating Los Angeles fires. The product of climate change, budget cuts and government neglect and indifference at every level, the deadly conflagrations have killed dozens of people, caused hundreds of billions of dollars in damage and sharply laid bare the disastrous consequences of the profit system.

As the WSWS observed in a recent editorial comment:

Los Angeles, the seat of the American entertainment industry, is a city known for creating illusions. But in just a matter of days, many of those illusions went up in flames, revealing the absolutely barbarous state of social relations in contemporary America and the total inability of capitalism to confront any social problem.

After subsiding for a few days, due to the nearness and calamitous nature of the fires, the Lively-Baldoni conflict has flared up once again. There are social elements whose self-absorption is not likely to evaporate so easily, who have too much invested (or think they have) in the present state of things. But for a great many others, the internecine warfare can only contribute to a healthy loss of illusions and a push toward burning political and social questions.



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