

# 'Wrong' endings have ruined several recent blockbusters

BY JAMI BERNARD  
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Movies have happy endings (the hero finds true love or a suitcase stuffed with cash) and unhappy endings (the hero dies in the course of doing something valiant). There are also endings that are just plain wrong because nothing in the film supports the conclusion. These endings cheat audiences.

Several recent films — "Bad Santa," "The Last Samurai" and "Something's Gotta Give" among them — have flagrantly wrong endings. (Warning: this column

is chock-full of spoilers.)

In "Bad Santa," Billy Bob Thornton plays a drunken, womanizing, child-hating burglar who moonlights as Santa Claus so he can case department stores for future break-ins. The funniest moment is when the cops shoot him in the back as he is trying to be nice to a kid for once. A hail of bullets cuts him down as he crawls along in his Santa suit, outstretched hand holding a cuddly toy.

This Santa is so bad it is fitting he should die, despite his change of heart.

Instead the movie cuts to a hap-

py ending with Santa's voice-over reassuring us that he survived the "Butch Cassidy"-like gunfire. The movie thus pretends to have a "happy" ending, even though this Santa is far from reformed.

In "The Last Samurai," Tom Cruise plays a burned-out American military adviser who embraces the samurai code of honor, even though that way of life is about to hit the historical dustbin. He and his newfound samurai pal (Ken Watanabe) wind up as the only survivors on a battlefield.

In the Japanese tradition, there is nobility in failure, and the samurai does the correct thing under the circumstances — he commits seppuku, the ritual (and honorable) act of suicide. But Cruise's character seems to forget the samurai values he so recently embraced. He walks off the battlefield unscathed.

Audiences may not want to see America's No. 1 box-office star kill himself, but the character's arc would be better served by a noble suicide after a life lived in guilt and misery.

"Something's Gotta Give" sets itself up as a bracing antidote to movies in which an older guy gets the younger babe. Here it's a middle-aged divorcee (Diane Keaton) who is the protagonist, and she has a choice of two suitors: a lecherous Jack Nicholson or a respectful Keanu Reeves.

If this movie really wanted to turn things upside-down, it would end with Keaton in the arms of the younger man, not running at the last minute into the arms of the ambivalent Nicholson.

"The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King," my favorite movie of 2003, does not have a wrong ending, but several endings. I wouldn't go so far as to say it hedges its bets, but it gives audiences too many options of how best to remember Frodo and his friends.

## Movie Review



PHOTO SPICIA TO THE GAMECOCK

Julia Roberts plays a liberal teacher at an all-female college in "Mona Lisa Smile". The film provides a unique perspective on gender barriers in the mid-twentieth century.

## 'Mona Lisa' addresses equality amidst biased 1950s academia

"MONA LISA SMILE"  
★★★★ out of ★★★★★

BY MEG MOORE  
THE GAMECOCK

Julia Roberts' character, Katherine Watson, has come to Wellesley, Mass., in pursuit of a dream.

Having harbored a long-held hope to one day teach at prestigious Wellesley College, she leaves her position at liberal-minded Berkeley and accepts a job with Wellesley's art history department. So long So. Cal., hello uppercrust New England. Tossed into a conservative world where tradition still defines one's education and expectation, she quickly learns that it will take more than from-the-textbook lectures to enlighten and change minds.

The women that live and learn amidst the ivy-colored walls of

Wellesley lead privileged lives. With their prim appearances and Harvard boyfriends, they epitomize the future of the conservative upper class.

Played by a cast of notable young stars including Julia Stiles, Kirsten Dunst and Maggie Gyllenhaal, the Wellesley girls clearly aim to assume their parents' blueblood traditions and roles. Yet they remain definitive college students, strong-minded and determined to succeed at whatever it is they are pursuing.

Much to Professor Watson's dismay, success, to many of the students, means marrying rather than pursuing a career. Society has engrained in them the necessity of becoming a homemaker, a faithful wife and mother. America's future, in Watson's eyes, is all too focused on the outdated values of America's past.

Roberts' character goes so far

as to accuse the Wellesley staff of running a "finishing school" rather than a college. Yet, in her feminist zeal Katherine Watson fails to realize that not all of these young scholars want the life that she envisions for them.

The film's attack on the 50s era views of a woman's role in society is balanced by its assertion that equality also entails supporting those who do choose the traditional path.

Seemingly critical of Wellesley ideals, the film does use the school as an anti-model of changing feminist ideals. Clearly, however, social attitudes remain the subject of the movie's criticism.

The girls that graduate in 1954 are charming, well-rounded individuals who appear to have thoroughly enjoyed their years at the all-female school. They emerge at the film's end as women well prepared for a successful future — regardless of what sort of roles they are encouraged — or choose — to pursue.

Roberts' character ultimately undergoes the biggest change. She is finally able to see beyond her liberal, California-bred notions of what it takes to be an independent woman. She educationally expands her students' minds as they encourage her to reevaluate her own ideas. There is a whole lot of learning going on — about art, about values, about dreams.

"Mona Lisa Smile" uplifts and invigorates — and yes, is a definite chic lick. Although it has its contrived moments, the movie succeeds in portraying the 50s era woman not as a simple-minded housewife, but as an intelligent, idealistic individual forced to juggle conformity with the push to assert her equality.

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