

## Stronger

Early this year, Hollywood released “Patriot’s Day,” a superb investigative procedural about the Boston Marathon bombing starring Mark Wahlberg. The focus of the film was the engrossing search, told through multiple story lines, for the perpetrators of the crime. With the new film “Stronger,” we have a view of the Boston bombing seen through the other end of a telescope, a tight focus on one man affected by that day’s violence—one of its victims.

It’s the morning of April 14, 2013, and native Bostonian and Costco deli worker Jeff Bauman (Jake Gyllenhaal) pleads to get off work so he can go to the Marathon finish line to see his on-and-off girlfriend Erin (Tatiana Maslany) finish the race. While there he notices a strange man in the crowd only seconds before the first of the Tsarnaef brothers’ bombs explodes, destroying his legs below the knee. He is operated on and saved and comes out of a coma to help the FBI finger his assailant. He also learns his fate, with his noisy, unruly Irish family smothering him, along with the steadfast Erin. Feted and fussed over and constantly called a hero, he struggles both to adapt to what family and city expect of him and to confront his debilitating injuries.

Rehabilitation is achingly hard, especially for a young man without a strong sense of discipline. Only a team of great health professionals and the committed Erin (who agrees to move in with him for support) get him on the right track. Physic rehab is perhaps even harder with his clinging family—led by mom Patty (Miranda Richardson), an irresponsible lush—constantly badgering him for attention and living off his celebrity status.

His being used as a tool for glory-by-association reaches its peak in an excruciating scene where Mom, during a drunken family revel, rises to make a surprise announcement that Jeff will be interviewed by Oprah Winfrey on her show, the woman’s ultimate definition of “making it.” With Jeff not knowing of the gambit and Erin completely unaware, a rift with her and his family opens, as his girl realizes how thoroughly he is being used.

Through all of this, Jeff is constantly struggling with how everybody (except Erin) perceives him: as some kind of “hero,” and the epitome of “Boston Strong,” the new city slogan. He is not reveling in his newfound renown but just getting pushed around—literally—receiving fatuous praise for accidentally standing near a bomb. The prospect of a baby with Erin, and a candid conversation with a man who helped save him on the day, moves Jeff to make something of himself by finally taking on and conquering leg prostheses. He ultimately comes to terms with his notoriety, too, and becomes a positive symbol of Boston by—one year to the day—throwing out the first baseball of the season at Fenway Park.

In showing Jeff’s dislocation and transformation, I would give full credit to director David Gordon Green and his star for not flinching from showing the gritty details of Bauman’s injuries: struggling in the bathroom, in the rehab room, even in the crass bar he habituates. Both do everything they can for the viewer to understand the strains on Bauman and how he overcomes them. If I would quibble about Gordon’s direction, it would be the mostly predictable depiction of the Bauman family and many other working

class Bostonians as stereotypical louts with little character besides loud, sour exegeses about Boston's professional sports teams. It's a quibble because this film really doesn't have time for intricate character development because of its clear focus on the protagonist.

And as for that protagonist, Jake Gyllenhaal triumphs in "Stronger." Now 36 and long past his youth days, he has taken on more meaty leads recently in films like "End of Watch" and "Nightcrawler." I'll leave it to others to assess his Boston accent but will praise him fully for his portrayal of an insouciant, flighty fellow who must plumb his depths to craft a new life.

An accolade to Tatiana Maslany (TV's "Orphan Black"), too, for a firm and moving performance as Erin. Playing a serious person, she makes you believe she could fancy an immature drifter like Jeff, then come to love him as his solid caregiver, and then accept him as a new man, recharged. Just as effective on screen, but at the opposite side of the spectrum, is Richardson, a willfully jolly drunk who does little for her son but cling to him as a ticket to ride. She is vividly irresponsible and memorably vile, redeemed only by her steadfast son.

*(The film is rated "R" for language and intense scenes, and runs 116 mins).*

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