

'Book Club: The Next Chapter' struggles to create conflict

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««

out of «««««

Running Time: 107 minutes

This movie from Focus Features opens exclusively at cinemas on Friday, May 12.

There have been a couple of comedies in recent months featuring an impressive cast of acting veterans, including *Maybe I Do* and *80 for Brady*, both of which left this reviewer unimpressed. Arriving just in time for Mother's Day, the sequel

Book Club: The Next Chapter

is another attempt to garner laughs from legendary stars. It's genial, very nicely photographed and a little stronger than the other titles mentioned in this paragraph, but there is only so much a great cast can do with bland material.

The film begins with book club members Diane (Diane Keaton), Vivian (Jane Fonda), Carol (Mary Steenburgen) and Sharon (Candice Bergen) having endured the COVID-19 pandemic by having video chats instead of in-person get-togethers. Over this time, the independent Vivian

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announces that she has finally decided to settle down and marry boyfriend Arthur (Don Johnson).

With the outside world improving and restrictions being lifted, the group reunite and decide to celebrate the upcoming nuptials with a bachelorette trip to Italy. As they see the sights, they joke with each other and share ongoing concerns about their relationships and living life to its fullest. But of course, certain parts of the trip don't go as smoothly as hoped for and the gang find themselves in a few comedic predicaments.

To be frank, there isn't much conflict or drama in this follow-up. While the characters are still dealing with minor problems in their personal lives from the first film, nothing about the story is particularly urgent or dramatic. Vivian feels some jitters about finally tying the knot, Carol worries about the health of her husband Bruce (Craig T. Nelson) after his stroke, Sharon is still looking for romance and everything seems, well, generally fine between Diane and Mitchell (Andy Garcia).

And while there are a few references to a recent book discussed in their club, even the reading material doesn't inspire specific story material. Instead, it seems like the characters travel around Italy trying to get themselves into trouble.

As noted, the cast are incredibly talented and do manage to elevate pedestrian material with a few offhanded comments and good-natured jabs at each other. There are a lot of bad puns and eye-rolling material, but an occasional funny remark (like a wedding dress shopping appointment).

One welcome addition is the presence of a police officer (Giancarlo Giannini), who appears after the ladies lose their bags and one very unusual valuable. Sharon and this relaxed crimefighter cross paths and butt heads on a few occasions throughout the film. Giannini's low-key delivery does make for an entertaining contrast between his character and the high-strung ex-judge.

Beyond that, the only major problem introduced is jammed into the proceedings near the end of the second act. It's almost as if everyone involved is primarily enjoying the scenery for the first 75 minutes.

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To a degree this is understandable, as the backdrops are quite gorgeous. The film is beautifully shot with incredible views of places like the Spanish Steps in Rome and the canals of Venice. At least when the screenplay doesn't create friction or big laughs, the scenery is eye-catching. In fact, it makes one wonder if a travelog featuring the actual performers shooting the breeze at these sights wouldn't have made for a more entertaining flick.

In general, the film is sweet, looks pretty and may entertain some members of its target demographic. It has a couple of funny bits and its light tone makes the entire experience fairly innocuous. Unfortunately, the screenplay struggles to create conflict, and therefore generate humor that might have resulted from elaborate shenanigans or awkward situations the characters could have gotten themselves into.

Ultimately, there is very little here that will make a lasting impression for the average moviegoer. In the end, *Book Club: The Next Chapter* isn't much of a page-turner.

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