After 9/11, the United States intensified its efforts in the international manhunt for Osama bin Laden (Ricky Sekhon). Nevertheless, the elusive mastermind of the terrorist attack continued to orchestrate mass murders in Bali, Istanbul, London, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere around the world.

Dismayed by the ever-mounting death toll, the authorities rationalized the use of rough interrogation tactics bordering on torture in the hope of expediting the capture, dead or alive, of the slippery al-Qaida leader. He was ultimately tracked down to a walled compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan where he died on May 2, 2011 during a daring, helicopter raid conducted by Navy SEAL Team Six.

Directed by two-time, Academy Award-winner Kathryn Bigelow (for The Hurt Locker), Zero Dark Thirty (military speak for 12:30 AM) is a riveting, super-realistic account of the decade-long search for bin Laden. Bigelow has again collaborated with Oscar-winning scriptwriter Mark Boal (also for The Hurt Locker), with the pair apparently gaining access to classified materials in preparing the project.

The film is structured as a tale of female empowerment revolving around Maya (Jessica Chastain), a cool, calm and collected CIA agent who manages to keep her head even when so many around her seem to be losing theirs, literally and/or figuratively. She also has an uncanny knack for deciphering which clues might be worth following, cutting a sharp contrast in this regard to bumbling colleagues who fritter away most of their time on wild goose chases.

At the point of departure, we find Maya finally getting her first taste of fieldwork after starting her career boning-up on bin Laden behind a desk in Washington, D.C. She's been reassigned to participate in the questioning of al-Qaida members and sympathizers being detained at secret sites located outside the U.S. where the Geneva Conventions provisions relating to torture presumably don't apply.

Soon, Maya's chasing clues from Pakistan to Kuwait to Afghanistan and back, alongside tone-deaf bosses (Jason Clarke and Kyle Chandler) who could crack the case quickly if they weren't such male chauvinists suffering from Persistent Disbelief Syndrome. That's the shopworn plot device which pits a frustrated, unappreciated protagonist against an army of

stubbornly skeptical naysayers.

Whether a convenient, cinematic contrivance or an accurate portrayal of what transpired, Zero Dark Thirty's version of history certainly makes for a very convincing piece of patriotic storytelling. Credit Jessica Chastain for imbuing her character, Maya, with a compelling combination of vulnerability, sagacity and steely resolve in a memorable, Oscar-quality performance.

CIA Agent Strangelove, or how I learned to stop worrying and love waterboarding!

Excellent (4 stars)
Rated R for profanity, disturbing images and graphic violence.
Running time: 157 minutes
Distributor: Columbia Pictures

To see a trailer for Zero Dark Thirty, visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ly77Wgd-DHA