

Meet John Doe

Liberty Films (Produced by Frank Capra), 1941

Screenplay by Robert Riskin

Directed by Frank Capra

Time: 1941

Place: A city in the Midwest, U.S.A.

Ann Mitchell, a reporter in her twenties, works at a Midwestern newspaper that has just been taken over by new management. Her editor, Hank Connell, informs her that the new owner, D. B. Norton, is axing her column because it's all "lavender and old lace" and not in sync with the paper's new format.

In a last-gasp effort to keep her column, Ann concocts a letter written by one "John Doe" stating that "four years ago I was fired from my job . . . I can't get another . . . slimy politics create unemployment and in protest I'm going to jump off the roof of City Hall." The letter creates public outrage and succeeds in getting the massive audience the owner wants. The bigwigs at the newspaper are pleased, and Ann gets to keep her column. But when Connell finds out Ann faked the letter, he's angry and wants the paper to drop the entire business.

He suggests that the paper report that its staff convinced John Doe to change his mind and therefore has saved his life. Ann vehemently disagrees with Connell and tells him so.

ANN

Wait a minute! Listen you great big wonderful genius of a newspaperman! You came down here to shoot some life into this dying paper, didn't you? Well, the whole town's curious about John Doe, and boom, just like that you're

going to bury him. There's enough circulation in that man to create a shortage in the ink market! Now, look, suppose there was a John Doe—and he walked into this office. What would you do? Find him a job and forget the whole business? Not me! I'd make a deal with him! When you get hold of a stunt that sells papers you don't drop it like a hot potato! Why, this is good for at least a couple of months. You know what I'd do? Between now and say Christmas, when he's gonna jump, I'd run a daily yarn starting with his boyhood, his schooling, his first job! A wide-eyed youngster facing a chaotic world. The problem of the average man, of all the John Does in the world. Now, then comes the drama. He meets discouragement. He finds the world has feet of clay. His ideals crumble, so what does he do? He decides to commit suicide in protest against the state of civilization. He thinks of the river! But no, no, he has a better idea. The City Hall. Why? Because he wants to attract attention. He wants to get a few things off his chest, and that's the only way he can get himself heard. So! So he writes me a letter and I dig him up. He pours out his story to me, and from now on we quote: "I protest," by John Doe. He protests against all the evils in the world, the greed, the lust, the hate, the fear, all of man's inhumanity to man. Arguments will start. Should he commit suicide or should he not? People will write in pleading with him. But no! No, Sir! John Doe will remain adamant! On Christmas Eve, hot or cold, he goes! See?

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