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# Philomena

**Abstract**
This is a film review of *Philomena* (2013), directed by Stephen Frears.

**Keywords**
Magdalene laundries, Martin Sixsmith, Roman Catholic Church, Michael Hess, Forgiveness

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*Philomena* is based on the real life journey of Philomena Lee (played by Judi Dench), an elderly Irish Catholic woman who sought to find her long-lost son after keeping his existence a secret for more than fifty years. The film, directed by Stephen Frears (*High Fidelity, The Queen*), serves as an exploration of the topics of grace, mercy, and most of all forgiveness, set within the context of the Catholic church. Aiding Philomena in her journey is atheistic journalist Martin Sixsmith (Steve Coogan), who serves as a rich foil to Philomena's compassionate nature despite her deep sense of hurt and sadness.

We learn that Philomena became pregnant early in her life and out of wedlock – no small sin to the Catholic church. To the convent where she lives, works, and eventually gives birth to her boy, such sinful carnal desires elicit the pain she endures through child birth and therefore no medication is given to her so that she may be punished for her sin. Years progress at the convent and Philomena's son Anthony is eventually adopted by a wealthy American family; she is left devastated, heart-broken, and grieves longingly for her boy. Yet she never speaks of her son throughout the decades, until finally her curiosity and love can no longer remain hidden and she begins her search. Enlisting the help of journalist Martin Sixsmith, the two embark on a mission to reunite her with her now adult son.

Their journey together in some fashion plays like a comical road-trip plot; Philomena and Sixsmith are polar opposites and much of the film playfully highlights their differences and perceptions of the world, especially when it comes to religion. It's a rather funny affair, yet underneath all the wit, Frears sharply emphasizes the main difference between his two leads in their respective responses to injustice. Near the end of their journey, it is discovered that Philomena's son Anthony – renamed Michael Hess and now deceased – had in fact returned to the convent in Ireland in his dying days in search of his natural birth mother, only to be fed lies by the nun Sister Hildegard McNulty; he is told that he was abandoned at birth and that his mother had made no effort to contact him. Philomena and Sixsmith respond quite differently to this blatant cover-up – this deliberate injustice. Philomena clings to her religious roots even though religious individuals were responsible for orchestrating this scandal, while Sixsmith uses this injustice as proof that faith is useless. Philomena wishes to forgive those who have wronged her, while Sixsmith demands justice in the form of retribution. One's response to maltreatment is retaliation, the other's is forgiveness.

*Philomena* provides a tale of deep emotional weight, but never falls into the clichés of "good" and "evil" which so much of Western narrative obsesses over. In the film when Sixsmith speaks to his editor, it becomes clear that in stories like these, there need to be "good guys" and "bad guys" and that the finale

must conclude with either a very happy ending or an extremely sad one. This is what the general public craves – good versus evil; just retribution for the protagonist or the utter devastation of her. Philomena however rises above these expectations of others. On countless occasions she states that her time at the convent was positive and that the nuns treated her well (the same people Sixsmith's editor characterizes as "the evil nuns"). We, the viewers, cheer for Sixsmith when he finally confronts the lying Sister Hildegard and launches into his accusatory tirade; we begin to think that just retribution is finally at hand. But Philomena undercuts the climatic finale when she appears in the room and apologizes for Sixsmith's behavior. "So, you're just going to do nothing?" Sixsmith abruptly asks her, to which Philomena replies "No," and then turns her attention to the elderly nun, "Sister Hildegard, I want you to know that I forgive you."

Forgiveness, especially in religious circles, so often operates as a theoretical concept that sometimes one is surprised when it is put into practical action. We witness this when Sixsmith questions Philomena, "What? Just like that?" This is not how the narrative is meant to be played out – where is the defeat of evil and the presence of retribution? But Philomena chooses not the route of retaliation but rather that of reconciliation. "It's not just like that," she retorts to Sixsmith, "That's hard for me. But I don't want to hate people."

One of the many reasons as to why *Philomena* earned critical praise and an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture is because the film challenges our own thoughts and prejudices. We as viewers also partake in the same type of '*lex talionis*' mentality that drives Sixsmith. Throughout the course of the film we await the reckoning of the "evil nuns" who wronged Philomena, only to have to seriously re-consider our bias towards our need for retaliation, thanks to the example of Philomena Lee. Frears urges us to evaluate our own moral positions of such heavy, religiously-influenced themes like forgiveness and reconciliation, all the while exhibiting a profoundly moving story about one little old Irish lady and her love for her son.