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Nobody Has to Know

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Nobody Has to Know

Abstract

This is a film review of *Nobody Has to Know* (2021), directed by Bouli Lanners.

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Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



Nobody Has to Know (2021), dir. Bouli Lanners

One of the quiet gems of the 2021 Toronto International Film Festival is an unlikely love story directed by Belgian filmmaker Bouli Lanners and shot on the bucolic Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. Lanners' deep love for this part of the world¹ is met as usual by his landscape-painterly style, emerging and vivid in his previous features *Eldorado* (2008), *Les Géants* (*The Giants*, 2011) and *Les Premiers, Les Derniers* (*The First, The Last*, 2016). With *Nobody Has to Know*, his first English-language feature, it feels as if he has arrived where he was always meant to be, and we can only hope he never leaves.

The film follows a fifty-something farm hand named Phil (played by Lanners) whose talkative style and empathic listening have endeared him to nearly everyone in the remote, rugged and yet contemporary community where there are no buildings except the local pub, but everyone has a cell phone. He works for a prickly aging sheep farmer, whose generations on the island are continuing in sons who don't think twice about their futures. Phil, like Lanners, is Belgian,

escaping from something, we're not sure what. Soon after it has been established how much he is liked and needed, Phil collapses in a stroke. When he recovers, he has lost his memory.

Memory and identity are at the heart of this deeply affecting film and so is the enduring persistence of love, which finds a way to name itself, even in the oddest of circumstances. As Phil starts to recover, he encounters Millie, the farmer's daughter, to whom he is immediately drawn and who is equally drawn to him. Renowned in the community for having a cold manner (her nickname is "ice cream"), she nonetheless seems to dote on him. She slowly helps him to reacclimate and relearn who he has been, though not even she can explain the dog that Phil finds waiting for him in his house. As Phil and Millie draw closer, she makes the ultimate confession: that she and Phil were secretly lovers before his stroke. Phil, astounded, nonetheless accepts it right away and asks the best and central question of the film: "Are we *still* together?"

Millie seems to both want him and avoid him, confused in her own needs, resulting in only a deeper longing for her in Phil. Millie's daydreaming sensibility is revealed in scenes in a realtor office where she never really works, to the increasing agitation of her assistant. The harsh years of growing up on a sheep farm have meant that she has never really known or experienced happiness, except perhaps in the solitary long walks she often takes, that lead her to brooding cliffs that look out on dramatic seas. When she spontaneously confesses to her brother that she has lied to Phil, it seems almost intentionally anti-climactic. Lanners seems to be saying that lies are sometimes necessary to reveal a truth. Eventually both Millie and Phil reveal to each other that they were privately in love with each other long before his stroke. The truth has set them free, but the weight of a lie still sits heavily in Millie's heart.

As Millie and Phil make their way in forming or reforming their relationship, we almost ache with them in the quietly blooming manifestations of attachment: as they walk on the beach,

share in music and books and explore the stories of Phil's many tattoos. Michelle Fairley is exquisitely tender and brittle as Millie, a fragile plant that has finally found a ray of sunshine, and Lanners brings an edge of shadow to his bewildered search for himself. When a brother turns up on the island looking for him, his memory returns, and the consequences and reality of Phil's life choices come home to roost for the lovers.

The sweeping grasses and tundra-like rock formations of the Isle of Lewis square off against the stormy seas and skies in Frank Van Den Eeden's austere and evocative cinematography. As the story progresses, the film's tonal palette lightens, as if light has drifted into the dark corners of fields and cliff crevices. Against this startling landscape, the lovers are often two small figures, overwhelmed by the rugged environment but never far from each other's side. We feel in this poetic lens that their time together is theirs to seize, even if the brisk winds and galloping cloud formations hint that it may not be forever.

¹ Lanners has said that when he was young, he was sure he was Scottish. "Even my parents don't understand why... I'm fully in love with this country and these people." See "Bouli Lanners, co-producers Ciara Barry and Rosie Crerar Talent Talk (Nobody Has to Know)", published by UK Film. (<https://vimeo.com/598997319>)