

Philomena: A Film Review

By

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Philomena, the critically acclaimed and controversial 2013 film, is based on the true story of Philomena Lee, a then unmarried Irish woman whose son was taken from her and placed for adoption with an American couple. Philomena's story began in Ireland in the 1950s. The two main characters in the film, Philomena, and Martin Sixsmith, the journalist who told her story are played by British actors, Judi Dench and Steve Coogan. This film was co-produced in the United Kingdom and the United States.

We meet Philomena when she is a 70 year old woman living in the UK. Through a series of flashbacks, we learn that Philomena was forced to give up her out-of-wedlock son, Anthony, when she was a teenager. We also learn that she has been searching for him since then. Philomena states that she thinks of her son every day and wonders if he ever thought about her. We meet Martin Sixsmith, a London journalist, when he is at a crossroad in his professional life. He recently lost his job and is contemplating writing a book on Russian history. Sixsmith makes it clear that he is not-at-all interested in writing a human interest story. Yet, this unlikely pair, brought together by Philomena's adult daughter who approaches Sixsmith at a cocktail party, embarks on a journey that takes them to Ireland, the United States and back to Ireland in their search for Anthony. We learn

that Philomena's daughter had only recently discovered the existence of her brother and the story her mother had kept secret for five decades.

This poignant film combines excellent acting and enough small lighthearted moments to keep it from being a tearjerker. Lee and Sixsmith could not be more different. Lee is a working class woman and still a devout Catholic. Her character is relatable, level-headed, empathetic and determined. In contrast, Sixsmith is a sophisticated, business-like, upper class male, an investigative journalist who has no time for secrets or lies. He is an iconoclastic atheist who, once committed, is driven to get at the truth of Philomena's story and what happened to Anthony. Based on Sixsmith's 2009 book, *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee*, this film hits all the right notes of empathy and compassion too long denied to Philomena. Although the screenplay changed many details, the broad outlines of Philomena's and Anthony's story are factual.

This film raises discussion of many sociological concepts. First, it is important to place Philomena's experiences in the context of the societal and cultural views that valued female chastity until marriage. These views were prevalent in the mid 20th century Ireland and in catholic settings in other countries. Second, there was (and still is) a clear double standard of male and female

sexual behavior in which women are blamed and men get to walk away from their responsibility in producing a child. Related to this second point is the stigma of being labeled as a “bad girl” that was assigned to unmarried women who became pregnant during that era. Sex education was not available to teenagers in Ireland at that time. Along with the stigma of unwed pregnancy came the isolation and punitive treatment of pregnant young women who were cared for in convents. Finally, to have a woman’s child taken away from her without her knowledge and consent was the final indignity.

The following is the story line of the movie: When teenaged Philomena Lee becomes pregnant after an encounter with a handsome young man at a local fair in 1951, her father, a widower, disowns her and sends her to Sean Ross Abbey in Tipperary, Ireland. In an especially distressing scene, we see Philomena denied pain relief medication during the breech birth delivery of her son because, as one nun states, Philomena should suffer the pain as a way to atone for her “indecent” behavior. With no way to obtain the £100 she owed the nuns for her care, Philomena becomes “indentured” at the convent for four years to “work off” her bill at the convent laundry.

Like the other young women at the convent, Philomena is allowed to visit with her child for only one hour each week. It is clear that her visits with Anthony are the highlight of Philomena’s week. Then comes the day when, at age 3 ½ years old and with no warning, Anthony is given for adoption to an American couple. The couple had originally planned to adopt Mary, the three-year old daughter of Philomena’s friend who also gave birth and lived at the convent. Anthony is so attached to Mary that he will not let her leave without him. So, the couple agrees to adopt Anthony at the same time and leaves Ireland with both children. Anthony and other children of mothers in this situation at that time were apparently among hundreds allowed to be adopted in exchange for a \$1,000 donation for

each to the Catholic Church. Philomena keeps silent about her pregnancy and Anthony’s birth for almost five decades because she believes the Church’s view that she behaved in a shameful manner. When she decides that she needs to know what happened to Anthony, she tells her adult daughter about the past and with the help of Martin Sixsmith, begins her search for Anthony.

Major stumbling blocks to finding him include the Catholic Church’s policies and Ireland’s laws about adoption. Visiting Sean Ross Abbey, Philomena and Martin are served tea and cake while being told by the nuns that they have no information to offer about Anthony because a fire had destroyed the adoption records. At a later visit, however, the nuns produce a document signed by Philomena when she was living at the Abbey, saying that she relinquished her son and promised not to try to find him. Apparently, Philomena thinks that she had no choice except to sign the document. The film makes it clear that she believes there are no other options for her or her baby.

Sixsmith’s research which ultimately identifies Anthony as Michael Hess leads to the heartbreaking revelation that Hess died of AIDS in 1995. Philomena and Sixsmith eventually learn that Hess had journeyed to Ireland twice to try to find his mother but was also stymied by the nuns. However, at Hess’s request, his ashes were buried in a section of the Abbey cemetery with the hope that his mother would return to try to find him. The camera shows a grave overgrown with weeds and a headstone inscribed “Michael Hess, a man of two nations and many talents. ‘Born July 5, 1952, Sean Ross Abbey, Roscrea. Died August 15, 1995, Washington DC.”

The film presents some of the highlights of Michael Hess’s life and implies comparisons between the Catholic Church’s treatment of female transgressors like Philomena and gay men like her son. A successful lawyer, Hess became a rising star in politics. He worked

for Ronald Regan and the Republican Party for more than a decade and ultimately served as Chief Legal Counsel for George H.W. Bush. Comments by colleagues and his partner make it clear that Hess often needed to hide his sexuality and was upset by the Republican Party's attitudes towards gay people and its blocking of funds for AIDS research.

A significant milestone for the rights of adoptees and biological mothers of adopted children in Ireland was launched as a result of this film. After *Philomena* and her daughter heard from so many people who were sympathetic to her search, in 2014, they launched the *Philomena Project* to bring about legislative change in Ireland so that access to 60,000 Irish adoption records will be granted to adoptees and their families.

About the Reviewer: Emily Stier Adler, Ph.D. is Professor Emerita of Sociology at Rhode Island College in Providence, RI. Her areas of sociological interest include the sociology of aging, retirement, grandparenting, family, and qualitative sociology.