

A Man Named Ove (2015)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 56 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone..."

Genesis 2:18

Like vinegar on a wound

*is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.
Like a moth in clothing or a worm in wood,
sorrow gnaws at the human heart*

Proverbs 25:20

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matthew 5:3

Ove, a 59-year-old grieving widower living in a Swedish gated condo community, must be the least successful would-be suicide in all of filmdom. Each time he takes flowers to his wife's grave, he says that he will join her soon. Usually taciturn, given to stern commands to his neighbors to stop violating some rule of the housing association, he is very talkative during these graveside visits. We gain the impression that not only were they very close in life, but that his wife brought out the best in him. After 43 years of working for the rail company the widower is let go, no doubt a cost-saving effort by the two executives who almost hide behind their laptops as they try to sugar coat his termination. Now the sorrow-laden man sees no reason to go on living. Writer/director Hannes Holm's tragicomedy, based on the best-selling novel by Fredrik

Backman, is Sweden's official Oscar nomination for 2016.

I lost count of the many times that Ove tried to kill himself—mostly by rope, and then by shotgun, and then by a hose pumping exhaust gas from his tailpipe into his car—but as he observes later, “It’s hard to kill oneself.” We gain an insight into his character when he does not close his curtains before climbing up on a footstool and placing the blue nylon rope around his neck, the other end tied to a hook in the ceiling. He doesn’t want to miss anything, and sure enough it is an outside distraction during one attempt that causes him to remove the noose and go outside to chastise the driver of a car hooked up to a trailer. There are no cars allowed on the streets of the development, he declares loudly. The driver is the hapless Patrik (Tobias Almborg), who with his pregnant Iranian wife Parvaneh (Bahar Pars) and their two children, is moving in right across the street. Patrik is so incompetent at backing up the trailer-hitched car that he runs into Ove’s mail box. In disgust, Ove takes over the car, deftly backing it into its parking space.

It will be the kindly Parvaneh who will interrupt most of the widower’s other suicide attempts, often knocking on his door either to borrow something or out of concern for his welfare. Even when he at first crudely rebuffs her, she brings him a rice curry dish which she insists he take. Eventually eating this, he finds it delicious, thus reducing his hostility and beginning an up and down friendship with the pair and their two young daughters. The old curmudgeon even babysits the girls, releasing his long buried feelings about wanting children. And late in the film, as Parvaneh’s driving instructor, he prevents her from quitting when the frustrated young woman has so much difficulty in engaging the car’s clutch.

The director uses the device of “life passing before one’s eyes at the moment of death” to inject the flashbacks. In these we gradually see the events that led to Ove becoming the

town grump, scolding a dog-walking woman not to let her pooch pee on the pavement, confiscating a teenager's illegally parked bicycle, or refusing to help a woman with her malfunctioning radiator. At the age of seven he loses his mother, and thus, for lack of childcare, often accompanies his father (Stefan Gödicke) to his workplace where the boy assists in cleaning passenger rail cars. He becomes as inwardly drawn as dad, but closely bonds to the man when the latter hugs and hugs him after the boy's nearly fatal mishap with a train. One day while helping his father clean a dining car, the boy learns a lesson in honesty when he finds a purse left behind and struggles over it with a deceitful worker who wants to keep it for himself. When Dad intervenes, he leaves it up to Ove to decide what to do with it. Later as a high school student (Filip Berg) he basks in his father's praise when he shows him his final school report card, and Dad proudly shares it with his fellow workers. This moment of glory ends abruptly with tragedy, one of many suffered by the Job-like Ole throughout the film.

Another tragedy, the loss of the family house by fire one night, has a better outcome. Left homeless, Ove brings a bag of his salvaged belongings to a rail car and lies down in a berth to sleep. Awakening late the next morning, he is surprised to find the train is moving and that here is a pretty young woman sitting opposite him. Unable to pay when the conductor arrives, Ove is embarrassed to accept the offer of the smiling young woman to pay for his ticket. He promises that he will pay her back. Over the next several days he takes the same train, but does not encounter her, until he is almost ready to give up. Spotting her at last, he knows that Sonja (Ida Engvoll) is the woman of his dreams. As they get to know each other we see that despite their educational difference she also is drawn to him. Thus, begins a long courtship during which she encourages him to improve his education.

Numerous developments in Ole's relationships with others are

shown unfolding around the flashbacks, the chief being his becoming a surrogate father to Parvaneh and a grandfather to her two daughters. His solitary life expands with his reuniting with his onetime best friend Rune (Börje Lundberg). The two, with their wives, had been close, clashing only over their choices in cars, he a fanatic owner of a Saab, and Rune preferring a Volvo. It was Rune and his wife who had led the revolt over Ove's harsh regime as president of the condominium association that deposed Ove, leading to the final break in their relationship. But now, with "white shirts," as Ove disdainfully calls bureaucrats, trying to move the wheel-chair bound Rune from his home into a care center, Ove springs into action to prevent this. And by now the grump who had earlier shooed away the stray Persian cat trying to befriend him, had taken in the animal at the urging of Parvaneh. Indeed, he has even sheltered a teenager whom he once would have scorned, a gay kicked out by his Muslim parents when he came out of the closet.

When misfortune overtakes Ove (again), he finds himself surround by supportive friends—including that Muslim teenager. He has learned the lesson contained in Parvaneh's words, "You can't go it alone." It is with her that Ove shares what had happened to his wife and the reason he now has no children—and also why all of the kitchen counters in his home have been built so low. Writer/director Hannes Holm has served us with a delightful visual parable that teaches that love begets love. Parvaneh is the kind of "salt" and "light" Jesus alludes to in Matthew 5:13-16. Or, to cite another Scripture, she reacts to Ove's initial hostility in the way that the author of Proverbs advises (25:21-23). Gandhi, with his ethic of nonviolence, would be proud of her.

Another thought occurred to me while watching Ove fail so many times to kill himself: this parable might be saying that Universe is not as cold and indifferent to our fate as some believe. The many intrusions which cause him to remove the noose from his neck; the impulse that leads him to remove the

twin barrels of the shotgun from his mouth; Parvaneh's discovery of the exhaust leaking from his garage that led to her saving his life—are these random occurrences, or are they the ways in which a caring God intervenes in our world, saving Ove for some tasks which only he can perform (including his saving a man from being run over by a train)? (I know that this also raises the age-old question of why God does not intervene in the thousands of successful suicides, but that is another question, wrapped in mystery.)

This is a film raising so many questions, its dark humor bringing chuckles, that I cannot recommend it highly enough. Ove will remind you of other curmudgeons such as Bill Murray's in *St. Vincent* or Clint Eastwood's in *Gran Torino*, all of which demonstrate that there are good qualities buried inside even a nasty person that love and concern can bring forth. I don't know what other foreign language films will be nominated for Oscar consideration, but I do know that they will have to be incredibly good to match this one! Do not let fear of English subtitles prevent you from experiencing this well-crafted feel-good film.

This review with a set of questions will be in the Nov. 2016 issue of VP.