

Million Dollar Baby (2004)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V-5 ; L-3 ; S/N-1

His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master."

Matthew 25:21

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Cor. 13:4-7

The older he gets, the better a Million Dollar Baby filmmaker Clint Eastwood seems to become. As with many of his other films, his latest gives us a haunting look at several outsiders who do not fit into the tight little compartments to which society would relegate them. Eddie Dupris' (Morgan Freeman) is the first voice that we hear, he, like his Red in Shawshank Redemption being the narrator of the film. Once a boxer with a shot at a title before losing an eye in his 109th fight, and now known as Scrap, he mops up the spit and such at The Hit Pit, a seedy gymnasium in a run-down part of Los Angeles, and occasionally

offers advice to some of regular wannabees at the gym.

Eastwood himself plays Frankie Dunn, once the cut man for Scrap. He was known as the best "cut man" in the business, being able to staunch the flow of blood in a fighter's face better than any doctor. He carries a burden of guilt over Scrap's last fight. He had wanted to stop it because of the intense bleeding but was not his manager and therefore lacked the authority to halt the event, resulting in the fighter's losing his eye. With Scrap as his only friend, now he manages his gym—and one African American boxer, Willie (Mike Colter), who is eager for a go at a title match. Despite his many victories, Frankie keeps telling him that he is not quite ready. This putting off of his fighter will have unexpected results, because it will allow for Frankie's taking on another boxer equally eager to develop boxing skills. Frankie also spends a lot of time reading T.S. Elliott and Yeats, and is even learning Gaelic.

Maggie Fitzgerald (Hillary Swank) is really an outsider in the world of boxing, at least in Frankie's world. He has no time for "girl boxers," telling her to go on and look for someone else to manage her. She tells him that she is tough, but he replies, "Girly, tough ain't enough." He believes that because she is pushing 32 she is too old to develop into a good boxer. Despite Frankie's numerous insults and put-downs, Maggie continues to spend at the gym the hours that she is not putting in as a waitress at a diner.

Frankie tells Scrap to shoo her away, but Scrap replies that she has paid her dues. The boss says, then give her money back. Scrap reveals that she has paid six months in advance. Frankie reconsiders, his gym not exactly a very prosperous affair, but he continues trying to ignore her, telling her to quit calling him "boss." He points out to Scrap how inexperienced she is, doing everything wrong as she punches the heavy boxing dummy. Late at night, when Maggie asks Scrap

if she can keep practicing (Scrap has a bunk in a back room where he resides), the old man lends her a speed bag and gives her a few pointers, Maggie receiving them with all the enthusiasm of a puppy that's been thrown a T-bone steak.

From the very beginning we see that Frankie is a spiritual man, despite his tough guy image. He prays by his bedside each night. He attends mass almost every morning at the local Catholic church, where he is always pestering the priest Father Horvak (Brian O'Byrne) with a question over theology or the Scriptures. Currently Frankie is puzzled over the Trinity: "Is it like Snap, Crackle and Pop," he asks, "all wrapped up in one box. Taking umbrage at what he regards as sacrilege, Fr. Horvak burst forth in a stream of invectives worthy of a seasoned sailor, and then, realizing he is standing at the door of the church, catches himself, curtly telling his irritating parishioner, "Don't come to mass tomorrow!" Frankie, of course, knows the priest does not really mean this. He further exasperates the priest with questions about the Immaculate Conception.

Fr. Horvak is not exactly your Barry Fitzgerald-type of sweet priest, but then none of the characters in this film, written by Paul Haggis and based on stories ("Rope Burns") by F.X. Toole, are your run-of-the-movie types. One of the hanger-ons at the gym is the orphaned Danger Barch (Jay Baruchel). Probably in his twenties, Danger has the naïve mind of a ten year-old. He lives in a fantasy world in which he is a boxing contender, so he frequently bursts forth with challenges to one and all to take him on. He is the butt of many jokes of the other athletes, not only because of his mentally challenged state, but also because of his choice of attire—a charcoal gray pair of sports tights. Only slowly do we realize why he is included in the plot—his story runs somewhat in parallel with Maggie's, both of them being ridiculed as outsiders trying to inject themselves into a place in which they do not belong.

When Frankie notices that Maggie's training technique has improved slightly, he knowingly observes to Scrap that someone must be giving her some tips on the sly. Scrap, of course, says that he doesn't know who it could be. Finally, matters develop in such a way that Frankie reluctantly agrees, with certain conditions, to train the "girl boxer." She eagerly agrees, and we see a montage of training sessions, Maggie, like Rocky in a similar sequence in that film, rapidly improving so that even Frankie has to acknowledge her progress. Frankie gives his protégé a ring full of tips, but the one he repeats the most is "Always protect yourself." Finally entered into a number of semi-pro bouts attended by only a hand-full of fans, Maggie proceeds to knock out her opponents in the first round. No, not just the first round—in the first few seconds, so fierce a contender is she! Frankie, unbeknown to her, actually has to pay reluctant managers to allow their fighters to enter the ring with her.

When he finally declares that she is ready for a professional fight, he gives her a beautiful dressing ground with an Irish name on the back, "Mo Cuishle." We see what a savvy marketer he is—they are in Britain, and he knows that wherever they go, there will be Irishmen who will love that name and be won over to her side. He is right, as throughout Britain and Europe Maggie draws enthusiastic fans to cheer for her.

Maggie grows as a person, as well as a boxer. Looking at herself as the product of an Ozarks "trailer-trash" family, she sees boxing as a way to break out of her past. As she puts it, "This is the only thing that I feel good at." For a while she can escape her origins and dream of something better. Just how sordid those origins are Frankie learns when he drives his protégé to her mother's home—in a trailer park, of course, with all the debris and such strewn around the yard. Frankie, now earning good money wants to present her mother Earline (Margo Martindale) with the house that she has bought for her, but the results of her giving prove far from satisfactory.

Frankie and Maggie grow close, but not, as in so many lesser films, as lovers, but as father and surrogate daughter. We learn that Frankie has his own daughter, but because of some unnamed wrong he has committed, she has never forgiven him, having broken off contact by returning the many letters he continues to send her. Once having withdrawn his feelings because of this hurt, and seeking solace in his church, Frankie finds himself feeling a deep and abiding connection with the young woman. And then, as we think that Maggie's chance to fight the welterweight champion will continue to lead down a path similar to Rocky's, Eastwood directs the story down a completely different one.

The ending of the film, just a tad reminiscent of the ending of Shawshank, but far more ambiguous, will leave you pondering the ways of God and humanity, and if you have an ounce of compassion, wondering if Frankie has made the right decision. I believe that boxing should be banned as an inhumane sport, but just as I loved Rocky, I also love this film and cannot recommend it highly enough. Long-time readers of VP will know that I use the word "great" rarely in regard to a film, but I believe that this one deserves that appellation. This the kind of film that keeps me wanting to put out VP despite its difficulties!

For Reflection/Discussion

(Important note!!! The following has to contain some spoilers, but you don't have to read this before seeing the film. The sooner you see the film, the better, because details of the unusual 3rd act are bound to leak out, even though every critic whose review I've read is careful not to give things away. Run, do not just walk, to the nearest cinema to see this excellent film!)

1) In what ways are each of the characters outsiders? With which do you most identify yourself? Why?

- 2) How does the advice Frankie offers several times, "Always protect yourself" reflect his way of life?
- 3) What do you think of the relationship between Frankie and his priest? From what you see of Fr. Horvak, could it be that his character is similar to Frankie's—and that is why the fight manager is drawn to him?
- 4) What is it about boxing that seems to draw Maggie and cause her to persist for so long? Reflect on the comment (was it Scrap who uttered it?), "There's magic and risk in everything for those who see dreams no one else can see but you." How does this apply to Maggie?
- 5) How has Frankie held back in acting upon his own dreams? How has this hurt him and those to whom he relates, especially the fighters he has managed? Have you been held back in some way because you were afraid of possible consequences or the risk of hurting someone?
- 6) How did you feel at the reaction of Maggie's mother and sister to her gift of a house? Why was her mother so reluctant to accept it? Did she ever think for a second of Maggie's feelings? Have you had a similar experience in trying to give something to someone whom you loved?
- 7) Why do you think Frankie at first does not tell Maggie the meaning of the name on her robe "Mo Cuishle" (sp?)? When you do learn it's meaning, how does this express his feelings for her? How is he at last letting down his guard?
- 8) Look up in an anthology or Yeats' collection the poem Frankie reads aloud, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." How does it fit his mood and aspirations, including something he says to Maggie about future plans?
- 9) Note the scene in which director Eastwood refuses to pander to us, exercising great restraint instead: How did you feel in the hospital scene when the Maggie's just-out-of-prison

brother treats Frankie with such disrespect? What happens in most films when this happens (see, for instance *Secondhand Lions*)? And don't we usually exult when the underestimated hero gives the uppity guy his come-uppance? But what happens in this instance?

10) In her final fight what happens when Maggie forgets her mentor's advice to always protect herself? Were you prepared for this turn of events? And later, did you expect a sequence of Maggie fighting to regain her mobility and strength?

11) What do you think of Maggie's plea and Frankie's struggle and final decision? Was the church any help for Frankie—how could it be, for what else could Fr. Horvak say than what he did? What do you think of his act? What do you think you would do?

12) Do you think that Maggie's life is a tragedy or something else? What light does Scrap's words to his grief-stricken friend shed on this: (This is a paraphrase) People die every day. Mopping floors, doing ordinary things. They never get their chance to do something good or great. You know what her last thoughts would be? "I think I did all right." 13) The ending is ambiguous: how does this allow us to think about it and draw our own conclusions, both about the fate of Frankie and the right or wrongness of his act? Do you believe there is any hope offered at the end? What shot suggests where Frankie has gone? Remember when he was basking in the luxury of real homemade lemon meringue pie—a set up for this? And yet how is the blurriness in part of the shot itself ambiguous? Do you think he will find "deep heart's core" the peace described in the Yeats' poem?