

Robot & Frank (2012)

PG-13. Our ratings: V -2; L -4; S/N -2. Running time: 1 hour 39 min

Thieves are not despised who steal only to satisfy their appetite when they are hungry. Yet if they are caught, they will pay sevenfold; they will forfeit all the goods of their house.
Proverbs 6:30-31

Director Jake Schreier and writer Christopher D. Ford's film is set just a few years "in the near future." Seventy-year-old Frank (Frank Langella) has served a couple of prison terms for his cat burglaries, but now lives alone in upstate New York. He has been long separated from his wife, and, although not estranged, was certainly not close to his son and daughter when they were small. Today his world traveling daughter Madison (Liv Tyler) is with a group helping children in Africa, and his son Hunter (James Marsden) works in Manhattan. Madison checks in with him regularly via TV communications, and Hunter, worried about his father's failing memory, drives up most weekends to set his house in order and make sure the old man is okay.

Frank at first resists having a robot to assist in his care.
2012 Samuel Goldwyn Films

Tired of the ten-hour round trip, Hunter brings one of the new butler robots (voiced by Peter Sarsgaard) and refuses to take it back with him. Frank at first is upset at its cleaning his house and fixing him nutritious meals, but slowly accepts it, although he refuses to give it a name, other than "Robot." It can carry on a conversation with him, but frequently reminds him that it is a machine and not a person.

Frank's main pass time has been reading the books that he checks out of his local public library. He also enjoys going there to see Jennifer (Susan Sarandon), the lone librarian. He is upset when he learns that soon the books will all be gone, replaced by digital devices provided by the libraries main benefactor, the arrogant software tycoon Jake (Jeremy Strong). Frank seeks to develop a closer relationship with Jennifer, but this is torpedoed by his forgetting that they had arranged for her to come over for supper.

Earlier, when Frank had spotted the expensive jewelry worn by Jake's wife at a library reception, he had come up with the idea of stealing it. He trains the robot—he has refused to give it a name—in the tricks of his trade, including how to pick a lock. Thus begins a suspenseful series of incidents that begin with the pair sneaking into Jake's modern home one night, and eventually resulting in the suspicious Jake and the kindly Sheriff Rowlings (Jeremy Sisto) showing up to question him about the stolen items. There is quite a surprise in store at the climax that involves Jennifer.

This delightful film is not only a crime caper, but also a portrait of a man trying to cope with the memory loss that comes with some form of dementia. At first I was somewhat repelled by Frank's low morality—he seems to see nothing wrong with his thievery. He even shoplifts each time he visits the village gift shop. I thought that making the manager into an unlikable shrew was a manipulative device to make us dislike the victim rather than the perpetrator of the petty crimes. However, There must be something about Frank in that despite

his not having been a good father, his two children still care a great deal about him and his welfare. As his lapses of memory grow more frequent, I found myself caring about him. Still, this does not excuse his stealing and lack of remorse, though maybe this is too harsh—he does, before sinking into another fog of memory loss leave his children a note concerning the jewelry. The writer of the passage above from Proverbs does cut some slack for a starving person in dire need, but I doubt that Frank was ever that needy. Maybe we need to look at Frank from the perspective of grace, a very flawed man still worthy of our concern? This certainly seems to be the way in which the nonjudgmental filmmakers do.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What do you think of Frank, especially his morals? How must he have been as a father when his son and daughter were children? And yet how do they relate to him now?
2. What do you think of Robot as a household device? Helpful in allowing an elderly person like Frank to remain in his home?
3. If you or a friend has had to deal with a parent or relative suffering from oncoming dementia, how have you handled the situation?
4. What did you think of the ending? Were you prepared for it? What does this add to your understanding of Jennifer? A real bearer of grace?
5. Do you think the ending turns the film into a possible parable about the providence of God?