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A Man Called Ove (2016)

En man som heter Ove (Sweden, 116 mins)

Director: Hannes Holm

Writers: Hannes Holm (screenplay)
Fredrik Backman (novel)

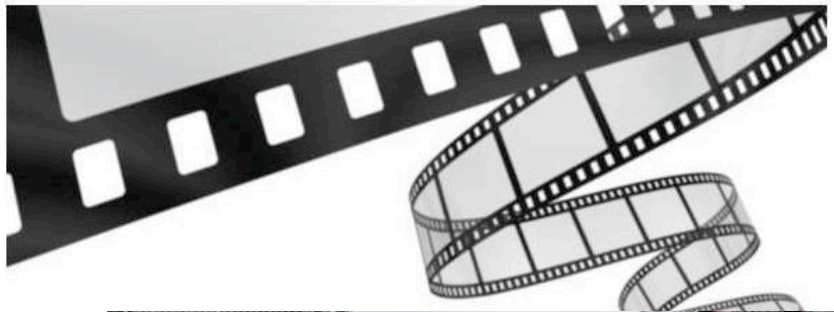
Cinematography : Göran Hallberg

Cast: Rolf Lassgård (Ove), Bahar Pars (Parvaneh), Filip Berg (young Ove), Ida Engvoll (Sonja), Tobias Almborg (Patrick), Klas Wiljergård (Jimmy), Chatarina Larsson (Anita), Börje Lundberg (Rune), Stefan Gödicke (Oves pappa), Johan Widerberg (Vitskjortan)

"A Man Called Ove" tells the familiar story of the curmudgeonly old man whose grumpy life is brightened by forces beyond his control. These forces take the guise of a much younger person who provides a sense of purpose for the old hero. A film like this rises or falls not only with its central performance, but also with its ability to engage the viewer's emotions in a credible, honest fashion. Movies like this tend to get dismissed as "manipulative" because audience sympathy for the protagonist is at least partially elicited by flashbacks to a litany of tragic or unfair past events. But all movies are manipulative by default; the effectiveness of that manipulation is the more valid measurement to inspect. On that scale, "A Man Called Ove" is a morbidly funny and moving success.

Adapting Frederick Backman's Swedish best seller, writer/director [Hannes Holm](#) doesn't veer too far from the storytelling structure we've come to expect. Instead, he tweaks expectations with the way he presents the material, and his grip on the film's tricky, tragicomic tone is masterful. For example, several flashbacks are cleverly presented as the "life flashing before one's eyes" moments triggered by the suicide attempts of Ove (Rolf Lassgård). Ove is a widower whose daily visits to his recently deceased wife's gravesite end with his verbal promise to join her in the afterlife. His failures of self-annihilation are due more to bad timing than botched attempts—he is constantly interrupted by neighbors or some distracting event going on in his housing complex. Priding himself on his reliability, Ove feels compelled to stop killing himself to address each interruption.

Keep in mind that the black humor in this situation doesn't arise from any mockery of Ove's pain over missing his spouse. That is presented as real, understandable pain. Instead, the humor comes from Ove's stubbornness as a creature of habit. Perpetually enforcing neighborhood rules nobody cares about nor adheres to, Ove can't resist the opportunity to scold those who violate them. Yet, for all his crabbiness, there's a level of selflessness inherent in Ove's character, a trait he finds infuriating yet he begrudgingly accepts. His wife, Sonja, played as a young woman in the flashbacks by Ida Engvoll, sees this in the younger version of Ove (Filip Berg), and the much older Ove acknowledges it after much bitching and griping. It's almost as if Sonja is sending him interruptions from beyond the grave just so he can have an excuse to complain to her like he's done every day since her passing. This compulsive adherence to routine will keep Ove distracted.



Also distracting Ove is the new, young family who moves next door to him. Though the husband is originally from the area, his pregnant wife Parvaneh (Bahar Pars) is of Iranian descent and new to the country. It is she who constantly irritates Ove while simultaneously endearing herself and her family to him.

"You survived struggle in Iran, moving here and learning a new language, and being married to that idiot," Ove tells her after taking up the task of her driving instructor, "driving a car should be no problem!" Of course, she can't drive it wherever Ove has those "no driving" signs everybody else ignores.

Admittedly, "A Man Called Ove" throws everything but the kitchen sink at poor Ove. There's a shocking death early on that haunts him (and us), and he is the recipient of several slights by higher ups at work and in the government. The marriage between the shy Ove and the jovial Sonja is full of love but fraught with personal tragedies. There's an almost Job-like mercilessness to some of the fates that befall him, yet the film never dwells on them. Instead, they're presented rather stoically and serve as a means for us to understand why Ove is who he is. This is a movie that softens its hero by giving him a cat, which sounds syrupy until you see how jacked up and scraggly this cat is. "He likes to shit in private," says Ove to Parvaneh. "Please give him that courtesy."

One gets the sense that the novel (and the award-winning film version) is so beloved because Ove represents a Scandinavian everyman who saunters on no matter what life throws at him. His admirable resilience toughens like leather, and his love of Saab and hatred of Volvo plays like a beautiful in-joke aimed straight at the hearts of his compatriots. That rivalry even costs him a friendship, though that same friend's subplot also presents Ove angrily battling the unfeeling agents of bureaucracy that caused him such agony as a young man. Holm pulls everything together in a well-crafted, satisfying package that is nicely balanced between comedy and pathos.

As Ove, Lassgård gives one of the year's best performances. He's well supported by the other actors (and the aforementioned cat), but this is a rich, complex performance that is both funny and moving. It would have been easy to just let Ove coast by on his amusing grouchiness, but Lassgård lets us see so deeply under that protective exterior. We feel as if we've walked a mile in Ove's shoes and absorbed his catharsis as our own.

Odie Henderson

Our previous presentation:

Based on the feedback slips returned on the night, you rated [Goodfellas](#), screened on Friday, October 27th, 4.7 stars out of 5. Please visit the current season page at <http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk> to read all the feedback comments.

You can still provide feedback on this, or any other film, by visiting the Discussions page: <http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk/discussion/>.

Next Cramphorn "Picture House" Film, 9th & 11th November: [Dunkirk](#) (12A), UK/Holland/France/USA, 2017, dir. Christopher Nolan

Our next presentation:

Monday 4th December: [Starless Dreams](#) (2016, Iran, 76 mins, dir. [Mehrddad Oskouei](#)) at 8pm.



When Hannes Holm submitted a first draft of his adaptation of Fredrik Backman's wildly popular novel "A Man Called Ove," the Swedish author replied swiftly – and tersely.

"Yes," Holm says, still a bit incredulous about the one-word reply. "A man of very few words. He uses all of them for his books!"

Holm is a bit more verbose, to say the least, and perhaps that's why the wily filmmaker was the ideal choice to make the bittersweet comedy about a curmudgeon (played in the present day by Rolf Lassgård, and his younger self by Filip Berg) whose recent dismissal from the factory he's worked at for 43 years is a cause for reflection on his life, particularly his romance with his late wife Sonja. He too is ready the Great Beyond, but when his attempts at suicide fail spectacularly, Ove fights to protect the few borders he feels he can still has some control over as the culture radically changes around him – the gated community where he chastises anyone who dares drives through it and the gruff exterior he puts up to protect his inner feelings. His defenses in both regards are tested by the arrival of new Persian neighbor, Parvaneh (Bahar Pars), and her family, who start asking for favors as they set up house, but soon appear to be the ones helping Ove by getting him out in the open and giving him a renewed sense of purpose.

"A Man Called Ove" is undeniably heartwarming, but with Holm at the helm, it's never cloyingly so, his sharp sense of humor making all of Ove's edges – his antipathy for cats and Volvo drivers (as a Saab purist) – particularly pointed and harder to sand off, but that much more rewarding when they begin to ebb. With the film recently tapped by Sweden as its official entry to this year's Oscar foreign language category after becoming one of the country's highest grossing films of all time, Holm was in Los Angeles on the eve of the film's release in America to discuss how he was able to make Backman's story his own only after surrendering himself to it fully, how real-life Oves almost sabotaged the production before it began and how the tricky shoot had him literally herding kittens.

How did you get interested in this?

I didn't. [laughs] No, usually I write my own stories, but I met Annika Bellander, the producer, and she showed me the book and [asked] would you want to do this? It was a best seller in Sweden at that time and I hadn't read it, but it sounded like a comedy, and I've done a lot of comedies. [So I thought] Life is short. I want to do some other things, so I said, "Thanks, but no thanks." But because I don't have so much money, I kept the copy of the book [I was given] and the same evening I started to read it. When the morning came, I was crying and I thought, "This is so good," because this story has both elements of comic relief and sadness in it. I called Annika and said, "Ok, I really want to do this," and then I met Frederick Backman, who I heard was very Ove-like – and he was a bit grumpy, but he said, "Hannes, I don't know anything about filmmaking. So please, write the story." So I can say that films can change people, but in a way, this film has changed me. I really wanted to tell my own stories, but nowadays, I'm more curious about other people's stories as well.

Is it true your parents might've been an influence on this story? It is that generation.

Yes, but it was also connected to writing my own stories because after the first day of writing, it was so stupid of me to add new elements into Frederic's story. So many films [adapted] out of popular books are so bad, and I started thinking, how come? The book lovers are so aggressive. They come to the cinema with the impression, "Now we will see how the director massacred my novel!" and they [will] often claim that the book is their own. So I gave that some thought and realized I can't shoot the book's story [verbatim] — I must steal the story from the

book. So I read it like 200 times to get the story into my veins and then I threw the book away and started to write the story. It was like when you've read a good book, and you meet a friend, and your friend asks you, "What was it about?" And you tell the story from the book. As you tell the story, it's not the story in the book — it's your version of the story, but you have to keep some highlights.

We are a very small Swedish production with a budget of \$350,000, but I was so shocked when the production company didn't want to have the cat in the film. It was like, "You don't want to have the cat? What about all these aggressive book lovers? They love the cat." So I really struggled to keep the cat. We couldn't afford, as you do [in America], the digital companies who can make whatever you want, but we could afford two very similar cats called Magic and Orlando — Magic was aggressive and Orlando was the sleepy cat, and they were so similar [that] every day, we'd take the wrong cat to the wrong scenes and [together] they'd... [Holm makes squawking noises like a fight], so we'd have these injuries to Rolf [Lassgård], [but] we also had great luck with the cats as well.

Were they easy to cast? With those piercing blue eyes?

The cats were easy to cast, but the cat owners...[laughs] In Hollywood, you have cat trainers, but in Sweden, you have cat owners and they're constantly lying people. I asked them, "Can the cat follow the actor?" Yes, it can follow the actor. "Ok." "Can the cat say 'meow' when I want it to say 'meow'?" Yes. Of course. "Can the cat stop when I want it to stop?" I start to feel [suspicious], [so I ask], "Can the cat take my car and buy some beers?" Yes! And that was the way of talking to the cat owners. The cats could do everything, but when we had them on set, they couldn't do anything. So it was like taking away the cat owners and dealing with the cats themselves.

Visually, the film becomes very fluid with a lot of steadicam shots. Did that grow out of the story or just your own personal style?

The style of the film often depends on the story, and together with my [cinematographer], we had this discussion of making Ove's life in the beginning of the film like [direct, static shots], and then when he starts to interact with Parvaneh, we start to move the camera more smoothly. It was pretty tough shooting. We were lucky because we looked for these semi-detached [row] houses in the middle of Sweden and something happened that we didn't think of. When we started [scouting locations], we would walk into the houses and there he was — [people exactly like] Ove, [saying] "Stop! What are you doing here? Who are you?" So it was pretty tough for us to find the houses because every day we met this Ove-kind of guy, stopping us.

Then we found this house [that's in the film] and thought this is the place to shoot, and it was exactly in the same town where the Saab car was built in Sweden. Of course, Ove loves the Saab and every day we could go to the Saab museum and pick the cars for the [different scenes], so that was great luck. And the people in that village town thought that we were shooting the film just because they had the plant in that town, but it wasn't. Myself, I drive a Chevy. Do you have a driver's license?

I do. I drive a Toyota. Was it easy to get permission to use the other cars? You're not particularly kind to Volvos.

[laughs] In a way, it was easy because it's still Swedish and a well-known brand. And there really was this struggle between Volvo and Saab from when I was a boy up until they stopped producing Saab. Volvo people in Sweden were more like very kind of career [oriented], but calm people and Saab people were sporty and more adventurous, so being a Saab driver, you're more tough. I grew up in a Saab family.

When you've got two actors playing the same character, was it a challenge to keep it consistent?

Yes, working with Swedish film with not that much money, it was, but I called Filip [Berg], who played young Ove, to be with us the first week of the shooting, so he sat beside us and watched Rolf, the older version, so he could see how he moved. It's one thing that I've been taking from Ingmar Bergman — I don't actually like Ingmar Bergman so much because of the lack of humor in his films, but he loved his actors. It's so important because actors can be very, very [difficult], but you must really love them because they're going to shine on the screen.

This has been one of the highest grossing films ever in Sweden. Have you been able to enjoy it?

What can I say? It's fantastic. I'm a bit of an underdog and I really need to change and be happy about it. [laughs] It's nothing that we really thought [would happen]. The best thing with it is that with Ove, it's a film about life and it's a film that's very hard to pitch. If it wasn't for the bestselling novel, you never could raise money for this kind of film and that makes me happy. I also love to hear stories about people who went home to the person they love and hug them because you never know when it's too late.

Nina Rothe