



Brian McClinton
Philomena



THE odd couple travelling on a quest is a fictional trope at least as old as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Quixote is the dreamer, the fantasist, the man of faith, whereas Sancho is the practical man of common sense, the sceptic, the voice of reason. On their journey each learns from the other, so that Sancho's scepticism ultimately helps to disillusion Quixote, while Sancho himself becomes seduced by his companion's imagination.

There are some elements of this device in the film *Philomena*, based on a true story told by Martin Sixsmith in his book *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* (re-issued simply as *Philomena*), and adapted for the screen by Steve Coogan and Jeff Pope. Coogan himself plays Sixsmith, the former BBC's 'man in Moscow, Washington and Warsaw', who subsequently became Director of Communications in the Blair government and later special adviser to transport secretary Stephen Byers. In 2002 He was forced to resign over a leaked email in which he advised not to release bad rail statistics on the same day as Princess Margaret's funeral. He then switched to freelance journalism and writing novels before eventually returning to his special interest in Russian history and politics.

As *Philomena* relates, his work on her story begins when he meets her daughter at a party. She tells him that her mother, a retired Irish nurse, has been searching in vain to find the son she was forced to give up nearly 50 years ago. She had become pregnant as a Catholic teenager in 1952 and, disowned by her family, was forced to enter Sean Ross Abbey, a convent in Roscrea, Co Tipperary, to give birth as a 'fallen woman'.

Refused painkillers during the agony of a breech-birth, she was told by abbess Sister Hildegard: "You are the cause of this shame, you and your indecency". Afterwards, she laboured in a sweat-shop laundry in the convent and only saw her son, whom she called Anthony, for short periods. Then one day when he was three, she watched helplessly from an upstairs window as he was taken away by two strangers.

Although viewing human interest features with disdain as not 'real' news and only for 'weak-minded, ignorant people', Sixsmith is desperate for work and also senses that there might be a bigger story here, so he agrees to help Philomena trace her long-lost son. They visit the convent, where they are told by the new abbess Sister Claire that all records were 'lost in the big fire', but Sixsmith points out afterwards to Philomena that, curiously, they still have her signed consent not to look for her child. Locals in the pub tell him that the nuns sold babies to Americans for £1000 each. Philomena agrees to accompany him to Washington, where Sixsmith discovers that Anthony became Michael Hess, a counsel to the Republican party, who was gay and died of Aids in 1995. His lover Pete tells them that shortly before his death he visited Roscrea looking for his mother and is buried there.

Philomena is partly a road movie comedy, a detective story and a philosophical/theological inquiry into the nature of faith, the limits of reason, scepticism and forgiveness. The comedy resides in the contrast between the cyni-

cal, smug, snobbish and occasionally rude Oxford graduate and former spin doctor and the simple-minded, yet dogged and tough Irish Catholic. He tells his wife that Philomena shows what a "lifetime of romance novels, the *Reader's Digest* and the *Daily Mail* can do to the human brain". Philomena, flawlessly played by Judi Dench, tells him that "just because you're in first class it doesn't mean you're a first-class person".

The clash of personalities merges with a clash of attitudes. Philomena displays the tenacity of faith in the face of unfathomable cruelty. She wants the truth but is prepared to forgive the nuns and the Church. For her, truth and forgiveness are healing forces. However, Sixsmith – played with remarkable restraint by Steve Coogan, who co-wrote the screenplay with Jeff Pope – is an atheist who sees sinister nuns, inhuman institutions and life's cruel injustices as conclusive proof of a god's non-existence.

A key scene occurs when Philomena and Sixsmith make their final visit to the convent. It transpires that Sister Hildegard is still living there as an invalid (this is poetic licence as the real person was dead by then). She refuses to admit that she did anything wrong in selling Anthony/ Michael or concealing him and Philomena from each other. Sixsmith angrily tells her that if Jesus was present, he would push her out of her wheelchair, presumably recalling the story of Jesus turning over the moneychangers' tables in the Temple. Philomena, however, forgives the nun. She tells him that his anger "must be exhausting".

This seems to suggest that Sixsmith learns from her, but the main failing of this fine film is that she apparently learns nothing from him. Humanists know that rejection of religion does not lead to outright cynicism and that it is not only the religious who have faith in humanity. Nor do they have a monopoly of forgiveness. These qualities are often inherent in character, rather than the product of a belief. After all, Philomena and Sister Hildegard belong to the same church but with very different outcomes.

Truth is important, but so too is justice. Righteous indignation at the world's injustices is a powerful and admirable emotion. Yet there is also a distinction between restorative and retributive justice. And Shakespeare was right when he suggested that earthly power is closest to the ideal when mercy tempers justice.

