

The Unforgivable: A woman leaves prison and the punishment begins

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Directed by Nora Fingscheidt; written by Peter Craig, Hillary Seitz and Courtenay Miles?

The Unforgivable, available on Netflix, from German film director Nora Fingscheidt (*System Crasher*), is a story about a former prisoner's re-introduction to society in Seattle as she tries to reunite with her sister. Based on a 2009 British miniseries, *Unforgiven*, the film gives us brief glimpses of the harsh realities of working class life, but ultimately squanders the opportunity for a genuine probing of life in the form of a conventional crime and family drama.

Ruth Slater (Sandra Bullock) is released from prison after 20 years for the murder of a sheriff who tried to evict Slater and her five-year old sister, Katie, from their family farm home. Ruth had been Katie's caretaker after the deaths of their mother during childbirth and their father later, presumably from heartbreak.

Ruth's parole officer Vince Cross (Rob Morgan) lectures her on how she should behave and reminds her that she is forever tainted as a "cop killer." He suggests she go to work in a fish processing plant, but Ruth has other ideas and wants to pursue a job in carpentry. The camera pans across a highway in Seattle and we see various parts of the city, including the affluent and the impoverished.

At one point, they drive past the Amazon headquarters with its three glittering spheres (often referred to as "Bezos' balls") in downtown Seattle. Ruth is dropped off by the officer at a filthy, rundown group home. Her roommates include society's broken and mangled.

The same day, Katie (Aisling Franciosi), adopted by better-off middle class parents after Ruth went to prison, has a car accident as memories of childhood trauma come flooding back. Her caring adoptive

parents, Michael (Richard Thomas) and Rachel (Linda Emond), arrive at the hospital with their biological daughter, Emily (Emma Nelson), to watch over her. Katie is unaware of her older sister's prison release date.

Also, there when Ruth is let out of prison is Keith (Thomas Guiry), the son of the sheriff who was shot. He begins to stalk Ruth. Keith tries to convince his brother Steve (Will Pullen) to participate in his plan for revenge. Steve is initially horrified that his brother would suggest such a thing and tells him to stop the scheming.

Ruth is determined to get decent employment. When she turns up at a construction site for the carpentry job she was promised, she is turned away. "It says I start today second shift," Ruth insists. "I got my carpentry certificate. I did a year of welding." Her rejection is presumably the result of her ex-convict status.

She has no choice left but to take the fish plant job. This is possibly the most interesting scene in the film. The supervisor tells her on her first day, "After two hours, you get a break. After five hours, you get lunch. Another two hours, you get another break. You gotta leave the line to take a whiz or something, go ahead. But you gotta make sure you're telling a person where you're going and how long you'll be." He adds, "Here on the floor, keep your head on a swivel, all right? Everything here is sharp. Everything's heavy. Everything can hurt you. Be careful. Welcome to the graveyard shift." These scenes ring true to life. But they are mere glimmers.

Ruth quickly learns the ropes at the plant. A coworker, Blake (Jon Bernthal), takes a liking to her and even begins to court her romantically, but this eventually falls apart.

The rest of the film reduces itself primarily to a series

of flashbacks of the day of the eviction, while in the present Ruth determines to reconnect with her sister at all costs. She ends up visiting the family farmhouse and improbably earning the sympathy of the prosperous lawyer, John Ingram (Vincent D'Onofrio), who now lives there with his wife, Liz (Viola Davis), and their two sons.

John assists Ruth in making contact with Katie's family, while brothers Keith and Steve now determine to kill her. Katie, haunted by the past, is a promising young college student with musical talent. There are twists and turns.

Bullock is capable as the bitter, hardened Ruth, but the one-note character of her effort to reunite with her sister becomes increasingly strained. Bullock does the best she can. The rest of the actors do an adequate job within the constraints. The cinematography at times transcends the limits of the narrative. Ruth and her coworker sharing a moment of intimacy while Katie plays the piano in the background is touching and even beautiful in the dark blue, late evening glow. The musical score by Hans Zimmer and David Fleming is fine but tends towards the predictable and sentimental on occasion.

Liz Ingram's sympathy for Ruth is also humane, but ultimately unconvincing. The upper middle class contempt felt by Liz (who is black) for the white former convict is effectively done. The desire to bridge the racial divide is a healthy one at a time of rampaging identity politics, but not truly worked out coherently.

We are also subjected to an excess of smug lectures about the police and their concerns. Ruth's supposed role as a "cop killer" is given far more weight than the fact she was evicted from her home by cops. Why was Ruth evicted? What sort of social system does this to people? None of this is explored.

The Unforgivable spends too much time encouraging sympathy for the police, widely hated by the working class and youth for their brutality and murderous conduct. In fact, in 2019, for example, police killed 1,004 civilians in the US, while civilians killed 48 police. The writer and director express the viewpoint of the nervous, affluent middle class.

As it happens, the majority of interesting moments in *The Unforgivable* occur in the first 20 minutes or so before the film congeals into an overwrought melodrama. The scenes in the seafood packing plant

and Ruth's plight had the potential to be examined in greater depth. A little bit of life is captured, but all too briefly and even superficially.

Seattle is a city of immense contrasts with a degree of social polarization that has become extremely acute in the last five to ten years, like many cities in the United States. There is much here that could be examined artistically. More than 10,000 carpenters in the area walked out last year in response to decades of concessions and wage stagnation. Teachers in Seattle have expressed seething discontent. Workers of all ethnicities face unlivable conditions as tech giants such as Amazon, Microsoft and Google dominate the economic and political landscape. In 1919, Seattle was the site of an explosive general strike, provoked by conditions as harsh as the ones emerging today.

But the social anger brewing in Seattle (or the rest of the US and the world for that matter) is ignored and instead we get a crime and family drama of the tritest variety in *The Unforgivable*.



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