

The Forgiven: The accidental death of “a nobody”

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Written and directed by John Michael McDonagh, based on the novel by Lawrence Osborne

The Forgiven, a feature-length drama released in 2021, is the latest film written and directed by John Michael McDonagh (*The Guard*, *Calvary*, *War on Everyone*). It concerns the consequences of a wealthy couple, on the verge of divorce, accidentally hitting and killing a young fossil seller, while driving to a party in the Moroccan desert.

We first see the unhappy pair, David and Jo Henninger (Ralph Fiennes and Jessica Chastain), on the top deck of a cruise liner sipping cocktails. They are travelling from London to the High Atlas Mountains in central Morocco, where an old friend is throwing a lavish party weekend at his garish grand villa. David toasts the approaching Moroccan coastline, exclaiming with sourness and trepidation, “L’Afrique.” The couple’s journey to the house party is filled with constant bickering and recriminations.

That night, two Berber teenagers wait by the roadside near the grand villa. They’re carrying a strange trilobite fossil they plan to sell to wealthy tourists heading to the party. The Henningers approach in their car, arguing about directions, when one of the boys steps into the road. The car hits him at high speed and he dies instantly. Meanwhile, at the grand villa, well-dressed guests mingle and dance to live Moroccan music. The party’s hosts, urbane Englishman Richard Galloway (Matt Smith) and his artless American boyfriend Dally Margolis (Caleb Landry Jones) thank everyone for coming to their blissful “soirée in the desert.”

The Henningers arrive belatedly with the dead body of the young fossil seller on the back seat of their rental car. Richard doubts their sincerity in regard to the tragedy. The police are called and the body is taken into the garage filled with expensive sports cars. During the interview, the police captain indulges the Henningers, aware that

David is a prestigious surgeon and Jo a writer of children’s books. He deems the death accidental. David tells Jo that the police won’t be back (perhaps Richard paid them off) and besides, “the kid was a nobody.”

The next day, while David is away on a camel ride, Jo takes a romantic interest in Tom Day (Christopher Abbott), a self-loathing but handsome financial analyst. David returns with a head wound after a group of young Moroccan boys attack him with rocks. He complains to Jo that the whole valley knows about the accident, “They’re insatiable gossips. It’s a function of being illiterate.” David remains unrepentant about the accident.

Later on, the dead boy’s father arrives to collect his son’s remains. In the garage, as Abdellah (Ismael Kanater) stoops over his son Driss’s body, he warns the loyal servant, Hamid (Mourad Zaoui) that “the Englishman must pay.” Abdellah asks David to return with him to his village of Tafal'aalt to bury his son. David refuses, worried that something more sinister is planned for him. He tells the group that Abdellah “might be f*cking ISIS for all I know.” He eventually has a change of heart and agrees to go with Abdellah back to his village—a two-day drive through the unforgiving Sahara desert—somewhat resigned to whatever fate awaits him. Further tragic events unfold.

This so-called “noir in the desert” is a nuanced and socially critical film. There are many touching moments throughout. In one affecting scene, Abdellah reveals to David that Driss had stolen his “Elvis”—a rare fossil worth \$10,000 US. Overcome with mixed feelings of anger and despair, he says, “If he had sold it to you for a few hundred euros I would have been happy for him.” In a striking scene that captures the injustice of this socially polarized world, Abdellah and his men pause as they carry Driss’s corpse to their jeep when a display of celebratory fireworks shoots into the sky overhead. As party guests clap and cheer in the courtyard, Abdellah

looks on, inscrutable.

The lead protagonists, Fiennes and Chastain, perform beautifully in their roles. The ensemble cast of partygoers are all developed with a sense of measure and subtlety. What is said is as good as what is not said. Much of the story's themes are brought out through ironic subtext. For example, when the jeep passes through the largest oasis in Morocco on their journey to Tafal'aalt, Abdellah's traveling companion, Anouar (Saïd Taghmaoui), makes a passing remark that the royal family of Morocco had visited there. David replies derisively, "I'm a big fan of royalty, always have been. Prince Andrew, Bin Salman — wonderful people."

The various characters in the jet-setter crowd reflect the multi-faceted and contradictory feelings and moods animating this section of the affluent middle class. On the one hand, their complacency, selfishness and entitlement. On the other, growing personal dissatisfaction, self-criticism and moral discomfort and perhaps even a sense, if not a distinct one, of personal and social responsibility. The relentlessly ominous atmosphere in *The Forgiven* may express their guilt, as well as their fear of the impending social explosion literally on their doorstep.

The Moroccan characters—the servants, police and villagers—are presented as complex and sympathetic. They are not passive observers or indifferent to their difficult circumstances, despite being trapped in them. They too struggle with the contradictions around them and tend to swing between restrained hostility toward the moneyed class that provide them with a livelihood, and degrees of empathy—even pity—for their profane and debauched lives. Overall, there is the sense that the social setup is weighing heavily on all of the characters involved, the party guests and Moroccan villagers alike, leading inexorably in an unclear, but terrible direction.

Despite some very hard-hitting and blistering dialogue, the film suffers from its largely subjective, identity politics interpretation of events, which weakens the film's overall impact. In explaining the social disparity between the rich socialites and poor Berber population, the story tends to rely in part on the categories of "white" or "Western privilege." Moreover, there is the unceasing presence of fate, threaded throughout the story with ominous proverbs and religious symbolism, which hampers the film's ability to provide a more material understanding of the devastating history of colonialism in the region — fundamentally, a product of capitalist class relations — and the contemporary social problems that emerged out of it.

Indeed, the film's director, John Michael McDonagh, makes clear his film is not a political satire. In an interview with *the Scotsman*, he said, "To me satire is when you're creating exaggerated characters to make a political point, but I'm not trying to make a political point. I just thought of it as a noir in the desert." It's unfortunate that he was not trying to make a political point more sharply. Filmmakers remain terrified in general of being accused of making "socially realistic films," to their serious detriment.

The film's script, written by McDonagh, was adapted from the 2012 novel of the same name by Lawrence Osborne. Although he did not write it with a possible film adaptation in mind, Osborne asserts that his novel was influenced by Mike Nichols's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), about a miserable middle class couple who torment each other, and John Huston's *The Night of the Iguana* (1964), about an alcoholic and defrocked preacher eking out an existence as a local tour guide in Mexico. Both are intelligent works that find a reflection in the screen adaptation of *The Forgiven*.

For his part, McDonagh claims that his single biggest influence on *The Forgiven* was Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975), about a disillusioned Anglo-American journalist who assumes the identity of a dead businessman while working on a documentary in war-torn Chad. What often characterizes Antonioni's work overall is not what his characters say and do, but their silences and lack of activity. Some of this is present in *The Forgiven*, at times to its advantage. Unfortunately, some of the defeatism and skepticism that pervaded Antonioni's later works especially has also found its way into this film.

To the director's credit, the film has a delicate touch that carefully avoids descending into banality and sentimentality, and this socially polarized world is not seen as an ossified fossil, but a living organism that appears on the precipice of change.



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