

Million Dollar Baby: An Oscar's Worth of Grit

A review of the film



Million Dollar Baby

(2004)

Clint Eastwood (Director)

Reviewed by

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Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby*, the Academy Award-winning drama about a woman fighter rising through the boxing ranks under the tutelage of Eastwood's Frankie Dunn, was recently released on DVD. The Oscars for both Best Picture and Best Director were clearly a tribute to Eastwood and his legacy of contrasting the gritty and sublime aspects of the human condition.

The story follows Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank), a plucky waitress from southwest Missouri who is willing to do endure poverty, ridicule, and physical hardships to become a professional boxer. However, she needs a trainer, and she pursues Frankie by joining his training gym. Frankie refuses initially, saying he does not “train girls” and pointing out that Maggie is too old (she is in her early 30s) and unskilled. With friendly conspiratorial assistance from the manager of the gym (Eddie “Scrap-Iron” Dupris, played by Morgan Freeman), Frankie finally relents and agrees to train Maggie. She quickly begins beating her opponents handily and is launched into a match for the women's title against the dirty-fighting world champion.

The film opens with a boxing match, highlighting the grittiness and barbarism of the sport. One of the fighters is hit and cut. The camera takes the viewer to see, at the cellular level, the cut open, the blood pour out, and the tissue swell. This is juxtaposed by the narration of Scrap, who reflects that boxing “is about respect.” The romantic theme of achieving redemption and self-respect by pursuing seemingly unobtainable goals is carried through the film. The principals in *Million Dollar Baby* need boxing to heal deep and long-standing psychological wounds: from past sins and estrangement (Dunn), from lack of love (Maggie), and from perceived failure (Scrap). Frankie attends mass daily but torments his priest by challenging basic church tenets, including that of the holy trinity. The exasperated priest knows that the gruff and proud Frankie is searching for forgiveness and peace, but the priest cannot quite get him to speak in personal terms.

The themes and characters blend nicely through this first half of the film. The principal characters are reasonably well developed, if not predictable. The cinematography holds the viewer's attention. It often feels as if the viewer is in the ring or sitting beside the characters. The training gym is full of shadows and the smell of sweat, blood, dust, angst, and lost hope. Aside from some romanticizing, the film does not treat boxing with kid gloves. Scrap has no sight in one eye from his last fight, although it's unclear whether it is Frankie or Scrap who regrets the loss more. The young men in the training gym have ambition but no apparent chance for success. They also do not have any advantages to help them through life's travails. The boxing world is also represented by graft, deception, and self-interest. The physical brutality of the sport is shown through cuts and grimaces and twisted bodies. The fans are portrayed as rabid voyeurs of violence. Maggie and Frankie transcend this sordid background as Maggie reaches the pinnacle of the sport.

As the plot unfolds, so does the gratuity of the story. The title bout turns in Maggie's favor until her opponent knocks her down with a cheap shot after the bell signified the end of a late round. Maggie falls against her stool and incurs a high-level, complete spinal cord injury. Unable to move and ventilator-dependent, Maggie pleads with Frankie to help her die. He refuses initially, but after she tries unsuccessfully to kill herself, Frankie begins to consider her request. The priest tells Frankie that if he were to do so, it would be more than a sinful act; he would lose himself. But he does kill Maggie. Rather than lose himself, the script implies that he finds himself redeemed and at peace.

Health care professionals, including psychologists, who see this film are likely to want to punch Eastwood in the nose. When Maggie is in acute rehabilitation, her hospital room is stark and she is barely tended, despite Scrap noting that the hospital is a “nice place.” There is no evidence of therapies, of psychological intervention, or even any other patients. Instead, the viewers see Maggie develop horrible pressure ulcers that require the amputation of her leg.

Psychologists will also notice the lack of character development in the nonprincipal roles. Maggie's family members, who go to Disneyland before visiting her in the hospital,

are depicted as “white trash.” There is no little subtlety in the characters, and the stereotyping is offensive. It is a cheap shot at rural Southerners.

The disability community, by and large, has been incensed by this movie. It perpetuates the stereotype that people who experience a spinal cord injury, especially one that results in tetraplegia, would rather be dead—that life isn't worth living any longer. Maggie says “I can't be like this, not after what I done. People chanted my name ... I want to die before I can't hear the voices.” Maggie's plea is devastatingly romantic, reminiscent of other tragedies (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet*). However, the simple truth of the matter is that individuals who sustain traumatic, body-altering injuries do not want to die. Filmmakers and other artists have historically and irresponsibly perpetuated this myth. For the record, there is a higher rate of suicide among persons with spinal cord injury (Dijkers, Abela, Gans, & Gordon, 1995), but by no means does the slight increase in rates justify this stereotype. Furthermore, loss of sensation and movement are hardly the only contributors to suicide when it does occur among persons with tetraplegia.

Of course, the ending begs the question of whether Frankie's decision to assist Maggie's death is moral, and it begs the question of whether Frankie truly achieves peace with himself. The film tries to achieve the sublime with these questions, but only the grit is revealed.

Reference

Dijkers, M. P., Abela, M. B., Gans, B. M., & Gordon, W. A. (1995). The aftermath of spinal cord injury. In S. Stover, J. A. DeLisa, & G. G. DeLisa (Eds.), *Spinal cord injury: Clinical outcomes from the model systems* (pp. 185–212). Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen.
