

# Lady Vengeance

Review by Hans Sherrer

What if a 19-year-old woman confessed to murdering a five-year-old boy and was imprisoned for 13-1/2 years?

What if the confession by that woman – Lee Geum-ja – was based on crime scene details provided to her by a police investigator because she had no knowledge of those details?

What if Geum-ja falsely confessed because the boy's actual murderer, a kindergarten teacher named Mr. Baek, threatened to murder her infant daughter if she didn't do so?

What if Geum-ja's sense of justice and patience was displayed by her slow three-year poisoning with bleach of a thuggish woman prisoner who sexually preyed on intimidated prisoners, and by doing this and other things she gained the loyalty of prisoners she helped?

What if Geum-ja didn't see her daughter during her many years of imprisonment because she had been adopted by an Australian couple?

What if Geum-ja had no interest in pursuing her legal exoneration, but instead during her years of imprisonment she devised a plan of retribution against Baek?

What if upon her release Geum-ja set her plan in motion and enlisted the aid of released prisoners she had helped?

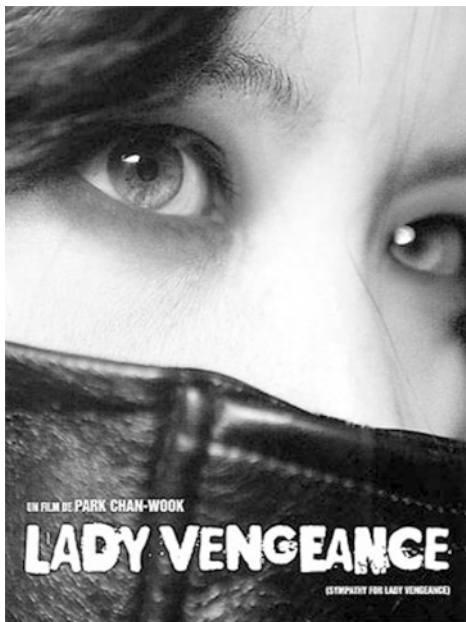
What if while surreptitiously searching Baek's home Geum-ja found video tapes of him sadistically killing five other children?

What if Geum-ja contacted the children's parents, including the parents of the boy she falsely confessed to murdering, and after showing them the video tapes gave them the option of either being a part of her retribution plan, or going to the police and letting the legal system deal with Baek?

What if the children's parents unanimously decided to pro-actively deal with their personal loss, and not involve the legal system?

*Lady Vengeance* is a South Korean movie that answers all of those "what ifs" as well as many others.

*Lady Vengeance* is a thought provoking movie that presents a way of looking at life and responding to a personal crisis in ways that are not just different than the norm in



this country, but which are in some ways diametrically opposite.

It may be novel for many people to consider that reliance on the legal system is not the only way to satisfactorily resolve a situation in which people have been harmed by a person's heinous actions. It also unwittingly provides support for the idea suggested by a British psychologist that more than a legal exoneration or compensation (Geum-ja cared about neither), a wrongfully convicted person psychologically craves a public apology by those responsible for the loss they experienced.<sup>1</sup> At a minimum *Lady Vengeance* honestly explores the importance of providing an emotionally satisfying resolution to the life shaking experience of a wrongful conviction.

The movie also suggests that the public prosecution, conviction and imprisonment of Baek was of no significance to the children's parents. What they wanted was to bring an unusual form of closure to the wounds caused by Baek's actions. Or, at the very least to know that Baek would experience an extreme dose of his own medicine.

Geum-ja has an almost angelic quality as she methodically and without any reservation pursues Baek's comeuppance. A promotional tagline for *Lady Vengeance* is: "All she wanted was a peaceful life." The inner calm felt by Geum-ja (and the children's parents) at the end of the movie indicates that after all she went through, she achieved her desire.

*Lady Vengeance* has an R rating for several scenes showing the aftermath of violence, and several non-graphic prison rape scenes

(between women prisoners). It is definitely not for the squeamish. Yet, unlike many U.S. films, the language is non-offensive enough to satisfy the most pious preacher. Although the movie has English subtitles, it is visually engrossing enough that they are not a distraction.

*Lady Vengeance* is South Korean director Park Chan-wook's final movie in a trilogy exploring vengeance. The first movie, *Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance*, was released in 2002, and at least one U.S. movie critic named it the best movie of the year. The second movie, *Old Boy*, was the 2004 Cannes Film Festivals Grand Prix winner. *Lady Vengeance* grossed more money during its opening weekend in July 2005 than any film in South Korean history. It opened in a limited number of U.S. theaters in the spring of 2006.

Chan-wook's trilogy is a powerful reality check for people who have the mistaken impression that South Korean movies are cartoonish kung-fu type flicks. *Lady Vengeance* is worth seeing if you are not queasy about diving head first into a thoughtful exploration of the struggle people endure to make sense of being thrust into the nightmare-like world inhabited by a person such as Baek, who has a heart of darkness.

#### *Lady Vengeance* facts:

Starring Lee Young-ae as Lee Geum-ja  
Director, Park Chan-wook  
Released in U.S. by Tartan Films  
112 minutes, color, R rating for violence  
Korean with English subtitles  
Released in South Korea in July 2005 and in the U.S. in April 2006.  
Available on DVD July 24, 2006.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Grounds, Adrian. Psychological consequences of wrongful conviction and imprisonment. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Ottawa: Jan 2004. Vol.46, Iss. 2; pg. 165.

## Freeing The Innocent A Handbook for the Wrongfully Convicted

By Michael and Becky Pardue

Self-help manual jam packed with hands-on - 'You Too Can Do It' - advice explaining how Michael Pardue was freed in 2001 after 28 years of wrongful imprisonment. Soft-cover. Send \$15 (check, m/o or stamps) to: Justice Denied; PO Box 68911; Seattle, WA 98168. (See Order Form on p. 47). Or order with a credit card from JD's website, <http://justicedenied.org>.

**"I congratulate you on your marvelous book *Freeing the Innocent*."**

P. Wilson, Professor of Criminology, Bond University