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WOKING FILM CLUB The Main Feature

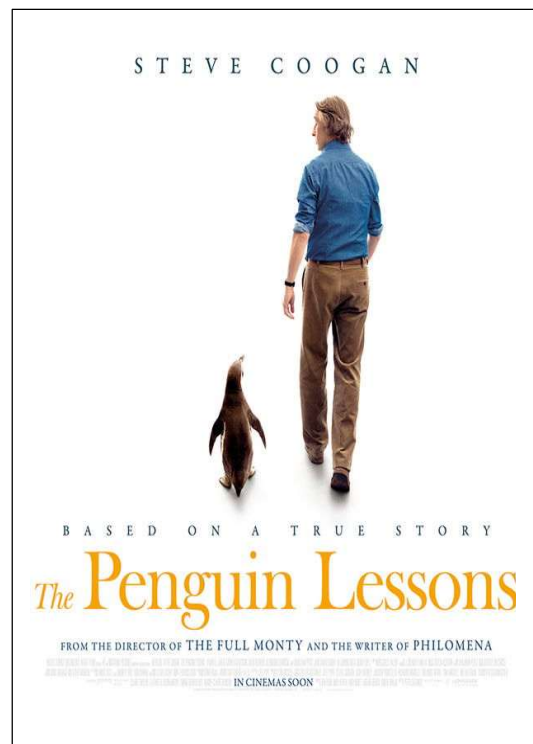
Season 45 – Issue 14 – Screening 9th April 2026

The Penguin Lessons

UK 2025
111 minutes Cert 12A

Director Peter Cattaneo
Screenplay Jeff Pope
Based on Book 'The Penguin Lessons' by Tom Michell

Steve Coogan	Tom Michell
Vivian El Jaber	María Alvarez
Björn Gustafsson	Science Teacher Tapio
David Herrero	Diego Camelia
Jonathan Pryce	Headmaster Buckle
Liam Mayne	Alejandro
Alfonsina Carrocio	Sofía Alvarez
Micaela Breque	Carina
Aimar Miranda	Ernesto
Nicanor Fernandez	Igor
Hugo Fuertes	Ramiro



In an age when animal-centric films often lean into sentimentality or CGI spectacle, Peter Cattaneo's *The Penguin Lessons* attempts something different: a tender, gently comic drama rooted in real events, balancing whimsy with political unease. Adapted from Tom Michell's memoir and anchored by Steve Coogan's performance, the film invites audiences to consider how the smallest acts of compassion can ripple through lives—though not without stumbling over the weight of its historical backdrop.

Set in 1976, on the eve of Argentina's Dirty War, the story follows Tom Michell (Coogan), a weary English teacher who accepts a post at an elite boarding school in Buenos Aires. On a seaside excursion, Tom rescues a penguin covered in oil after an environmental disaster. Naming him Juan Salvador, Tom smuggles the bird into the school grounds, where it quickly becomes both companion and classroom mascot. As Tom grapples with his disillusionment and sense of futility, the penguin provides unexpected lessons in resilience, loyalty, and joy. Meanwhile, Argentina's slide into military dictatorship casts a shadow over the narrative, raising questions about privilege, responsibility, and the ability (or inability) of personal kindness to counter systemic cruelty.

Steve Coogan is at the centre of the film's appeal. Known for his dry wit and sometimes caustic comic timing, here he delivers a subdued, humane performance. His Tom is equal parts cynical and vulnerable, making his transformation—however modest—feel genuine. Jonathan Pryce and an ensemble of Argentine actors lend gravitas and local colour, though their roles often feel underwritten compared to Coogan's. The real star, of course, is the penguin. Played largely by live birds, with minimal puppetry and animatronics, Juan Salvador exudes a tactile presence that CGI could never replicate. The bird's waddles, glances, and stubbornness provide the film with humour and heart.

At its best, *The Penguin Lessons* operates in the register of a gentle fable. It suggests that friendship, even across species, can sustain individuals in bleak times. There are echoes of *Dead Poets Society* in its school setting and themes of mentorship, though filtered through British irony and avian antics.

Yet, the film's tone is also its Achilles' heel. The whimsical charm of a penguin in a boarding school often clashes with the harrowing reality of Argentina's dictatorship. References to the disappearances of thousands are acknowledged in text cards and fleeting subplots, but the integration feels cursory. The result can be jarring: a penguin frolicking in a fountain one scene, and hushed whispers of state terror in the next. For some viewers, this dissonance undermines the story's emotional credibility.

Critics have been sharply divided, but on Rotten Tomatoes the film has a glowing 95% audience rating. General audiences have embraced its feel-good warmth and understated humour, with many describing it as "charming," "sweet," and even "needed in these times." The film succeeds in creating a genuine connection between man and bird, avoiding the over-manipulated sentimentality that plagues many animal films. Its cinematography captures both the lushness of the Argentine countryside and the looming menace of a nation in turmoil. The pacing, too, allows quieter moments to breathe.

Yet it is precisely the attempt to marry whimsy with political commentary that proves divisive. For some, the penguin is a symbol of resistance and survival; for others, it is an unwelcome distraction from a backdrop that demands deeper engagement. The film's preference for comfort over confrontation may make it uplifting, but also leaves it open to charges of superficiality.

The Penguin Lessons is not a perfect film, but it is a sincere one. It offers audiences a gentle story about unexpected companionship and the healing power of kindness, carried by Steve Coogan's understated performance and the undeniable charisma of a real penguin. For viewers seeking a heartwarming escape with just a touch of historical edge, it delivers. For those who expect a probing exploration of Argentina's Dirty War, it may feel inadequate, even misguided. Ultimately, whether the film resonates depends on what one seeks from cinema: comfort or confrontation. On balance, *The Penguin Lessons* offers a quiet, flawed, but memorable reminder that sometimes the smallest creatures can inspire the greatest lessons.

Susan Widdup



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Club website: www.wncc.org.uk. Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to reactions@wncc.org.uk by close Tuesday 14th April.

Discs of most of our previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.

Argentine rights activist Rosa Roisinblit dies aged 106



She was honorary president and a founding member of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, a group that searched for children stolen during Argentina's military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. "We only have words of gratitude for her dedication... and the love with which she searched for the grandsons and granddaughters until the very end," the campaign group said in a statement. Some 30,000 people were killed or forcibly disappeared during Argentina's "Dirty War". Children of detained opposition activists were seized and given up for adoption.

Rosa Roisinblit was born in 1919 in Moises Ville, a town of Jewish immigrants in central Argentina. She worked as an obstetrician and moved to Buenos Aires in 1949, where she married in 1951.

After the military coup of March 1976, the junta moved to eradicate the opposition. Tens of thousands of activists were snatched in raids and held in clandestine detention and torture centres. Many were thrown into the sea on notorious "death flights". An estimated 500 of their babies were stolen. Roisinblit's pregnant daughter Patricia, son-in-law José Pérez Rojo and 15-month-old granddaughter Mariana, were kidnapped in 1978. The couple had been left-wing activists. The family was transferred to a school, known as Esma, which was the largest detention centre in Buenos Aires.

Patricia Roisinblit was kept alive long enough to give birth to her son in a basement. The couple's bodies were never found, and Mariana was returned to Rosa, who raised her. The new-born baby was given to an air-force intelligence officer to bring up.

After her family's abduction, Roisinblit joined the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo and served as treasurer for six years before working as vice-president from 1989. Her grandson was tracked down in 2000 by his sister Mariana and through the work of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. He was reunited with Rosa and Mariana after DNA tests confirmed they were related. He had been given the name Guillermo Francisco Gómez by the adoptive parents: Francisco Gómez and Teodora Jofre.

Roisinblit was in the courtroom in 2016, when Gómez was jailed for life over the boy's abduction. Jofre was separately jailed for three years. Later that year, two men - a former air force chief and an ex-intelligence officer - were sentenced to 25 years for the abduction and torture of Patricia and José. They were among hundreds of soldiers and leaders prosecuted for human-rights abuses.

At the age of 96, Roisinblit attended the trial with Guillermo and Mariana. A year later, she told AFP news agency: "This wound never heals... But to say I'm stopping? No, I'll never stop." "We fight but the heroes are our children who rose up against a fierce dictatorship and gave their lives for a better country," Roisinblit said.

Guillermo is a human rights lawyer and works with the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, continuing his grandmother's legacy. In a post on X on Saturday, he said: "My Grandma has passed away, and beyond the sadness I feel, it comforts me to think that after 46 years she is reunited with my mom and with her great love, my grandfather Benjamín."

Comments and reactions to **How to make Millions Before Grandma Dies**

(Lahn Mah) - shown on March 26th 2026

No of reaction slips received = 26

Average score = 7.12

Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Number	0	0	0	0	2	6	8	7	3	0

What family does not have its little ups and mostly downs looking after its elderly/dying parents revealing the good/dross

Good but a bit slow

Entrancing! Absorbing to watch M's journey to a better understanding of the important things in life

Simply touching and realistic

Blink and you miss it subtitles made it hard to keep up but otherwise excellent

A pity about the speed of the subtitles. I couldn't read them all

Very sensitive. Good choice

Slow at times but worth watching

Enjoyed this film – found it very poignant. Astonishing that neither of the 2 main characters were trained actors!

Charming, delightful, touching but oh so true

Very enjoyable, well-acted portrait

Slow. Subtitles very quick

Well worth watching but had trouble reading subtitles as disappeared too quick

I'm sure this story will ring true for quite a lot of people

Difficult to follow due to too many characters and fast-moving subtitles. Emotional 2nd half

Greed is a deadly sin - and Amah was the only sympathetic character in the film

Another cracker with great performances from "M" and "Amah". The twist at the end was very touching

Position	Film	Score	Reactions
1	Mr. Burton	8.41	29
2	Touch (Snerting)	8.20	30
3	Conclave	8.15	34
4	Frantz	7.91	32
5	The Dressmaker	7.73	26
6	Perfect Days	7.34	29
7	How to Make Millions...Grandma	7.12	26
8	Thelma	6.92	24
9	Chevalier	6.80	25
10	Girls Will be Girls	6.29	34
11	Maria	6.16	25
12	Jimi - All is By My Side	4.77	26
13	A Christmas Tale/Conte de Noel	3.72	25

Our Next Film - 23rd April – I'm Still Here (Ainda Estou Aqui)



You feel this film in the pit of your stomach –
The Times

It is a lead performance that finds great potency in containment, with Torres never as striking as when the camera quietly rests on her face, her eyes always looking forward, her intent unshakeable – Little White Lies

One of the best films I've ever seen about the power of family – The Chicago Sun-Times

We have seen families depicted on screen countless times but the five youngsters who comprise the Paiva household inhabit their roles completely. Salles deliberately blurs the line between documentary and dramatization and creates an exceptional film – Leonard Maltin