

Incendies: Directed by Denis Villeneuve

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [June 14, 2011](#) issue



SEARING FAMILY STORY: Upon her death, Nawal (Lubna Azabal) leaves her twin children a few clues to unlocking her heretofore hidden past. PHOTO BY SABRIK HAKEEM. © 2011 SONY PICTURES CLASSICS.

Incendies, which was nominated for last year's foreign-film Oscar and won numerous Genies (the Canadian equivalent of the Oscars), is a disturbing layover at the crossroads of forgiveness and revenge. It's a challenging film on several levels. Not only is there a hearty helping of violence to be digested over the film's 130 minutes, but audiences must also wrestle with a complex narrative structure—complete with intercuts and flashbacks and even a few chapter headings.

The story begins in a notary's office in Canada, where two fraternal twins, Jeanne and Simon Marwan (Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin and Maxim Gaudette), are hearing the last will and testament of their mother, Nawal (Lubna Azabal). We soon learn that Nawal was a hard-working but enigmatic woman. Each of the twins receives a sealed envelope to be delivered to a brother and a father they never knew.

Simon dismisses this task as a cruel party trick from the grave—more evidence of his late mother's instability—and refuses to participate. But Jeanne, the more

thoughtful of the two, seeks to honor her mother's request as best she can. This leads her on a spiritual journey to the Middle East, where secrets that have been buried for decades are waiting to be unearthed.

Writer/director Denis Villeneuve never reveals the name of the country where the search plays out, hoping to make the tale more universal than specific. But all clues suggest that it is Lebanon, which suffered through a 15-year civil war that ended in 1990. This is important because the ongoing battle between Christians and Muslims is at the heart of the struggle. The film goes back and forth between an examination of Nawal's painful early adulthood and Jeanne's search for the truth about the mother she barely knew.

Along the way, we meet a plethora of fascinating characters, from superstitious midwives and murderous family members to bloody revolutionaries and sadistic torturers. As we travel the bumpy trail, we slowly discover that Nawal was a remarkable woman, with more than enough courage and chutzpah to stand up to religious persecution and sectarian violence. She impressed people along the way and left lasting memories. These memories make Jeanne's journey into the past more complicated, since most of the people she meets remember her mother, but few of them want to reveal the dark truths surrounding her trying life.

Part of what's fascinating about the film is the way it doles out information. Sometimes we discover key facts before Jeanne does, so we can gauge her reactions. Other times the filmmakers reveal things to her and to us at the same time, so we can compare our senses of horror and regret.

What makes this expository juggling act all the more impressive is that *Incendies* is an adaptation of a very talky 2003 stage play by Wajdi Mouawad. Villeneuve manages to translate paragraphs into pictures, allowing us to see the horrific revelations that are delivered via monologue in the original play.

Villeneuve is helped immensely by a supremely talented cast, especially the two actresses who portray mother and daughter, their faces often merging into each other's as the story digs deeper. Also noteworthy is the reliable Rémy Girard as the notary Jean Lebel. Lebel proves to be a sage and loyal guide, who demonstrates his love for Nawal by leading Jeanne into the past and down through the circles of hell.

Incendies is a demanding film, with little patience for easy answers. It also requires you to keep your eyes focused on the screen at all times, since even a momentary

glance away may cause you to miss a piece of the puzzle that was Nawal's life. By the end, you may feel exhausted by the film's intensity—but appreciate the pummeling you just took.