



FILM: **CAN YOU EVER FORGIVE ME?**

FDG RATING: 3.6 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Marielle Heller: *director*  
Melissa McCarthy: *actress, Lee Israel*  
Richard E. Grant: *actor, Jack Hock*

DATE: December 16, 2018

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **CAN YOU EVER FORGIVE ME?**

The phrase “starving artist” comes to life in the curmudgeonly character of Lee Israel who, after writing a few successful biographies, (the likes of Katharine Hepburn, Tallulah Bankhead, Estee Lauder and journalist Dorothy Kilgallen), falls out of step with current tastes, as well as with her literary agent, and resorts to desperate measures after receiving an eviction warning while dealing with her ailing cat (one of many feline pets), and being fired from her day job as a copy editor. Frumpy, grumpy, a loner, and unwilling to conform to social norms, Israel had few options professionally. But confidently arrogant about her writing talent, she finds a deceptively old typewriter and proceeds to type fake letters from celebrities and her favorite literary figures, channeling their tone and writing styles, and sells them for hundreds of dollars to book dealers. It actually all began when she stumbled upon a pair of letters written by Fanny Brice while researching the vaudeville comedian for her next biography, which got nixed by her agent. Israel steals them from the library and sells them to a local bookshop owner (Dolly Wells) for a nice sum. And an even nicer sum after she embellishes the second with a witty postscript of her own invention. And so begins her lucrative but shady 2nd career that was a much needed ego boost to her skills as a writer.

Although Melissa McCarthy’s character looks much frumpier than the photos of the actual Lee Israel, we trust that her portrayal is accurate. Her comedic talent is perfectly calibrated to resonate with her character’s pugnacious demeanor so that we can’t help but like her. All of our discussion group participants applauded her performance. One commented that although not a fan of McCarthy, she was very believable in her role as a New York loner with an in-your-face witty attitude.

But it was Richard E. Grant, as her loyal, hard-drinking, transient friend, flamboyant Jack Hock, who stole the show with an Oscar worthy performance, making the melancholy, dusty pair a delightful odd couple as they meet regularly for drinks at one of the Village’s oldest gay bars. He becomes the front man for her illicit business, charmingly peddling the letters after dealers started to get suspicious.

According to one published critic, it’s a low-stakes crime drama, a buddy comedy, a period piece and a loving tribute to the real Lee Israel. We relished the gritty, nostalgic view of 1990s New York, with (soon to disappear) musty, cluttered independent book stores, and dreary, sepia toned, weathered walks through the city streets. One discussion participant described it as a dark comedy, entertaining and thought provoking. She pointed out that the scene in the courtroom, where Lee Israel speaks to the judge, brought the film to a dramatic conclusion. Others said the film was heartbreaking and at times hysterically funny showing what measures artists will take to survive. Another noted that the film had more potential than it realized, that the high points were not very high and the tension, for example, with the FBI was not very tense.

We forgave the film for any shortcomings, and authenticated it with a very credible score of 3.6 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies!

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