

***Can You Ever Forgive Me?* (2018)**

DIRECTOR: Marielle Heller

SCREENPLAY: Nicole Holofcener, Jeff Whitty

CAST: Melissa McCarthy (Lee Israel), Richard E. Grant (Jack Hock), Dolly Wells (Anna), Jane Curtin (Marjorie), Ben Falcone (Alan Schmidt), Tim Cummings (Craig), Anna Deaveare Smith (Elaine)

SPECS: 107 minutes; color

AVAILABILITY: DVD/Blu-Ray (20th Century Fox)

Based on Lee Israel's memoir of the same name, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* depicts the trials and tribulations of Israel as a struggling writer in 1990s New York City. At the start of the film, her successful career as a biographer peters out. Though she hopes to write another biography, this time on Fanny Brice, her editor swiftly rebukes the idea and suggests Lee's declining career is her own doing. In order to make money, Lee begins selling personal valuables, such as original letters from famous authors. After being offered a low price for a "bland" letter, Lee realizes she can forge embellishments and even entire letters to make more money. She persuades her friend, Jack Hock, to join in her criminal enterprise, with the promise of financial gain appealing to both characters as a gay man and woman drowning in an oppressive and unforgiving city. Eventually, the FBI catches wind of the crimes and begins an investigation. Jack's subsequent arrest and cooperation lead to Lee's trial and her admission of guilt.

Due to the nature of the film being based on a true story, the sexuality of both Lee and Jack are non-negotiable. However, an adaptation is still just that: an adaptation. Any screenwriter or filmmaker could have depicted the characters' sexualities as they saw fit, regardless of real life, depending on what fit the narrative they were trying to tell. With Nicole Holofcener and Jeff Whitty's script, as well as Marielle Heller's deft direction, Lee and Jack's identities are complex, layered, and, most importantly, whole. Their sexual identities are both important to their characters and arcs, while not their only defining traits, thereby avoiding the two greatest sins of representing queer characters: sexuality being the only defining trait of a character, or having a queer character in name alone. The movie centers the characters'

queerness — audiences see Lee meet with an ex-partner, Jack take a lover, and explicit references to the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic — without ever tokenizing or exploiting it. As director Marielle Heller explained on IndieWire’s Filmmaker Toolkit podcast: “Their sexuality is not what defines these characters. The fact that she’s a lesbian and he’s a gay man are not what define who they are there. There’s so much else that is important to them at this moment in their lives, but it is the truth of their circumstances” (Dry, “Future of Queer Film”). Such an explanation perfectly encapsulates the uniqueness of this film, as a narrative which encourages both the individual parts and whole sums of its characters while also telling a larger and true story.

Examining Lee and Jack separately allows for the many layers of the film to come to light. While Lee’s arc is largely confined to the film and her own, sometimes small-minded personal world, Jack exists within a broader scope. Think of it like this: Lee is the character of the writer, Jack is the character of the historian. Both are valid and both speak to different ways of incorporating queer characters and narratives in storytelling, especially true stories.

Lee is a mercurial character — often crude and tactless, she is selfish and jaded by a world and industry which has pushed her aside. While Lee may speak to larger problems of accessibility within the publishing industry and, even broader, a capitalist society, her story still primarily exists in a narrow vision. Lee cares — first and foremost — about herself, her well-being, her credit and acknowledgement as an author, her own self-preservation. There is nothing inherently wrong with this until it becomes clear such a character is a standard not everyone can meet. Within the white supremacist world of the United States, this standard is steeper, riddled with obstacles, longer, and lonelier for some. A person’s race, sexuality, gender, socio-economic status, religion, neurotypical status, and more determines their standard and how wholly themselves they can be in the eyes of society. *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* walks this line exceedingly well. Lee is an unlikable character, both to the audience and the people who exist within her world, yet she is also not unforgivable. In storytelling, it is an outdated trope, and product of white supremacy, that the Other is the villain — or at least not the hero. These Others are their stereotypes — queer people as sexually promiscuous and sinful, Black men as thugs, Latinx people as freeloaders, traits

which threaten the god-fearing nature of white supremacy. When this is the only way marginalized people are portrayed, it becomes dangerous, with their lives seen as lesser, their rights negotiable, their worth ancillary and offered, rather than inherent. This is the consequence of George Gerbner's cultivation theory, which proposes "the more time people spend 'living'" in fictional worlds such as movies or television, "the more likely they are to believe social reality aligns with reality portrayed" in such fictional worlds (Riddle, 1). If portrayed realities exclusively peddle in negative stereotypes, symbolic annihilation occurs. This is another term coined by Gerbner, positing: "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner & Gross, 182). In subsequent years, the theory of symbolic annihilation has expanded to include not only a lack of representation, but negative or stereotypical representation as well. What happens, then, when an accurate and whole representation of Lee, as well as her narrative, hinges on her own nastiness, while being mindful of not perpetuating negative cultivations of a gay character? Writers Nicole Holofcener and Jeff Whitty walk a careful and nimble tightrope.

What Lee does to earn the attention of the FBI is wrong, but does not discount her struggles as a gay woman, her fame and talent as a gay woman, her *worth* as a gay woman. In Holofcener and Whitty's script, they take great pains to make this distinction. Their script allows Lee to be human and not have to represent or bear the representation of an entire community - this type of characterization is typically reserved for white supremacist-approved characters, i.e. white, straight, cisgender characters who can carry enough complexities to make mistakes, even ones as egregious as a federal crime, and not be written off entirely. Lee is not above consequences, but neither is she deserving of blanket condemnation. Audiences understand this not only through Lee's individual character arc, but through her relationship with Jack, which sits at the center of the film as, more than anything else, a love story. Both characters are culpable for the actions they knowingly commit, as Jack willingly aids Lee with her forgery, but what overwhelms this in the film is their friendship as two gay people finding solace in one another as society turns its back on them. There comes to be a trust between them — until Lee's beloved cat dies under Jack's care while Lee is away stealing authentic letters from various institutions. Lee ultimately ends their

friendship over this, but continues their criminal partnership out of necessity for both of their incomes. One of the final scenes in the film — after Jack has participated with the FBI, resulting in Lee’s court summons — is a reconciliation between the two. Both have plenty to apologize for, but it’s Lee’s contrition which pierces the heart more, as she’s the one who originally dragged Jack into her mess, and now he’s dying of an AIDS-related illness.

“I have no one to tell, all my friends are dead,” Jack says to Lee early on in the film. In *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, which takes place in 1991, New York City had yet to reach its peak of AIDS-related deaths (1994, by which nearly 50,000 people had died). In 1983, however, New York City accounted for more than half of all AIDS-related deaths and new infections in the country; in 1982, Rupert Murdoch paper the *Australian* referred to HIV/AIDS as the “gay plague”; and it wasn’t until 1985 that President Ronald Reagan finally said the word “AIDS” (Todd, 81). Though Jack hadn’t seen the peak, he had still lived through more than a decade of terror, the deaths of loved ones, and a complete lack of care from his country’s government. While subtle, Jack’s existence as a gay man in 1990s New York City was intentional on Heller’s part. The quote at the start of this paragraph was one of the first things Heller added into the script, she told IndieWire (Dry, “Future of Queer Film”). Heller continued:

He says it in this very off-handed dark humor. There’s no feeling sorry for himself in that moment. It’s just kind of, it’s not even a thing, he just says it and moves on. But hopefully we as an audience go, “Oh right, this is New York City, a gay man, 1991.” (Dry, “Future of Queer Film”)

Jack’s line about the death of friends and his own HIV-positive status is not the only detail referencing the time period or political backdrop. The film’s production designer, Steven Carter, placed an ACT UP poster in the window of Julius, the bar Lee and Jack frequent, and also a real-world location often referred to as New York’s oldest surviving gay bar. ACT UP stood for “AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power” and formed in 1987, a “nonviolent direct action group” which held its first protest on March 24, 1987 on Wall Street (Todd, 85). The actions of ACT UP served to demand action over the unnecessary deaths of thousands of LGBTQ people — and it worked. Shortly after this first demonstration, the US

Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced a time reduction for the approval of new drugs treating HIV and AIDS-related illnesses. Though the film does not center on the AIDS epidemic nor Jack's reality living with the disease, its decision to include and, more importantly, *how* to include it speaks volumes.

Historians and researchers now agree the United States government acted largely in a reactive way to the AIDS epidemic, rather than a proactive way. Though the disease was first recognized officially in the United States in 1981, President Reagan did not take any action until 1987 when he formed the Watkins Commission, "partly because the actions of ACT UP and other activist groups made it impossible for him to ignore the crisis any longer" (Todd, 90). Even with such a commission and the attention — finally — of the government, AIDS-related illnesses became the leading cause of death among men aged 25 to 44 in 1992, and the leader cause of death among all Americans in the same age group only three years later (Altman, "Leading Killer"). This epidemic and the government's fatal inaction affected the LGBTQ community in devastating ways, beyond the tragedy of the disease itself. As Matthew Todd writes in his book *Pride: The Story of the LGBTQ Equality Movement*: "By 1985, the world was in blind panic and, as the disease was seen as one only affecting only gay men [sic], a homophobic hurricane consumed the lives of those affected" (81). Throughout the film, Jack struggles with the realities of being a gay man in the 1990s, even in a city which boasted a known LGBTQ community, including homophobia, homelessness, and the ravaging of a merciless and unrelenting disease. The freedom, then, of Lee allowing Jack to stay in her home and watch her cat, becomes clear. He has a bed to sleep on, a roof over his head, a comfortable and safe place to bring a lover home, away from the eyes of anyone who would judge or harm. Through a clever use of show-don't-tell, the movie is able to convey the importance of Lee and Jack's friendship in such a time, regardless of any criminal activity. "The AIDS crisis was the moment that the lesbian and gay community really united, especially in New York City," Heller explains. "For a lot of men, lesbians were people who ended up taking care of them as they died. Lee and Jack represent that in some small way" (Dry, "Future of Queer Film").

Can You Ever Forgive Me? is a riveting film full of riveting performances about a riveting-near-unbelievable true story. Its true accomplishment, however, lies in its exploration of LGBTQ

loneliness and the pain, desperation, and solace of finding companionship when completely left behind and forgotten by a cruel and close-minded world.

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