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## **“Passing.” Review of Steven Spielberg, *Catch Me If You Can* (California: Dreamworks Pictures movie, 2002).**

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Though offered and (well) received as a holiday comic romp, Steven Spielberg’s *Catch Me If You Can* may be his most personal film since *Schindler’s List* (1993). There, as Spielberg has remarked, he for the first time reflected upon his Jewish identity. Consciously or not, Spielberg’s saga of conman Frank W. Abagnale (Leonardo DiCaprio) addresses the rest of his own career, when he hid his personal identity behind escapist entertainments — that is, when he “passed” undefined as Jewish. As in Woody Allen’s *Zelig* (1983), the Jew’s temptation to disappear behind a false identity broadens to any ethnic identity’s hunger for assimilation or Everschnook’s fear of being different in a culture that worships the uniform (Pan Am and up).

The only Jewish characters in the film are the absent Mrs. Roberta Glass, the French teacher, and her victimized substitute, whom Frank turns away. As Frank replaces the Jewish element, Jewishness is consigned to the implicit. For example, when people are eager to be duped, Frank responds “Even better,” a phrase more familiar as the Yiddish, “*Noch besser.*” His father’s Rotary Club story, which Frank recycles as a Lutheran grace, is a Jewish parable of survival. Two mice are stuck in a bucket of cream. One sinks and drowns, the other struggles until he turns the cream to butter and walks away. Frank Sr. (Christopher Walken) drowns and Frank Jr. struggles eventually to recover his integrity and a more honest success than that predicated on his imposture, or “passing.”

Frank’s “professions” reflect especially Jewish fantasies. As a French teacher he deploys the power of the word, specifically his mother’s language (*mamma loshen*), against the bullying arch-Gentile “Brad.” Frank proposes to Brenda Strong (Amy Adams) as the perfect Jewish catch — both a lawyer and a doctor — and a Lutheran to boot. *Noch besser.* His most un-Jewish profession, Pan Am pilot, is the wildest Jewish fantasy, especially when he “wears” a uniform of *shicksas*, eight wannabe stewardess, to evade the dragnet at the airport.

Frank connects to his FBI pursuer, Carl Hanratty (Tom Hanks), through a series of Christmas Eve conversations. Now, you don’t have to be Jewish to feel alienated on Christmas Eve — but it helps. Hanratty exults after the first phone call, “You have nobody else to call!” On other Christmas Eves, Hanratty arrests him in France and visits him in prison, discovering his

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potential as an FBI adviser. The latter begins his conversion from criminal to citizen, Outsider to Insider, fake to self. The film's Christmas release heightened these scenes' emotional import.

Frank's conversion from "paperhanger" (forger) to FBI fraud specialist is a kind of *bar mitzvah*. The *boychick* (which in the effeminate DiCaprio's case goes beyond Yiddish) becomes a man. By the time he turned 19, Frank had successfully impersonated a Pan Am pilot, a medical paediatrician, and a lawyer, and cashed almost four million dollars in bogus checks. Spielberg omits the real Frank's stint as Sociology professor (too easy?). The closing titles inform us that Frank has been married for 26 years and lives quietly (i.e., legally) in the Midwest with his wife and three sons.

The film's driving motive is the hero's need to recover his lost family, a Jewish concern even outside the Holocaust genre. Where the real Frank chose to live with his father (and dedicates his autobiography to him), Spielberg's Frank runs away from home rather than choose one parent's custody. His campaign is to recover not just the Cadillac, jewels, big house, and furs ("Everything they took from you, I'm going to get it all back"), but the broken family.

There is a Jewish inflection in the disillusioned American Dreamer, Frank Sr. As a soldier in liberated France, he resolved not to leave without the "blonde angel" who kicked off the community show. Though he marries that dream *shicksa*, Paula (Nathalie Baye), he loses her to his Rotary Club president/friend Jack Barnes (James Brolin). Frank Sr. smiles at his son's first impersonation and delights in his son's exotic destinations but he seems increasingly bitter at his success. When he orders a toast for his son's gift Cadillac, Walken projects an astonishing mix of anger and frustration over his pride. "The rest of us really are suckers," the failed con whispers to his flashy son. When Frank seeks his father's control, he replies: "You can't stop." The son is living out his father's failed dream of thwarting the government. The father is deluded that his son has the FBI "running for the hills." In prison, Frank Jr. is reduced to his father's last job, delivering the mail.

As in the Jewish matriarchy, the mother is the family's emotional centre. Frank's criminal career begins and ends around his mother. He uses her French to pull off his first con, he is arrested in her home town, Montrichard, France, where he is printing his forged checks, and after escaping through the airplane toilet (a perverse parody of rebirth), he is re-captured outside his mother's new family home. The alienated son stands in the snow, peering in at his mother, who poses as archly as in a Hallmark Christmas card, when the police encircle him behind. Despite their ethnic difference, Frank's parents stand in for the Jewish immigrant family whose son strives to amend their failure and to fit in where they couldn't.

Frank wants the Strong family to replace his lost one. He watches the Strongs do the dishes swaying together to "Embraceable You," to which his parents danced more suavely just before they split. He is as immediately drawn to the awkward braced Brenda as his father was to Paula's beauty, because he identifies with the victimized. He impersonates a doctor after he sees her abused by one. He thinks of marriage to re-unite *her* family, for Brenda was banished when her father's golf buddy's seduction required she abort. The allure of the Strong family harmony is false.

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Roger Strong (Martin Sheen) is so eager to marry off his plain daughter he doesn't absorb Frank's confession: "I'm not a doctor, I'm not a lawyer, I'm not an airline pilot. I'm nothing, really, just a kid who's in love with your daughter." By supporting Frank's pretence at being a lawyer, Strong proves Frank Sr.'s point that the NY Yankees always win because the other teams are awestruck by their pinstripe suits. Though Frank Sr. failed to impress the bank manager, Frank Jr. mobilizes the power of the uniform, whether the Pan Am pilot's suit, the doctor's frock (which trumps the candy-striper's pinstripes), or the veil of steward. As the classic Jewish poseur Groucho enacted, the suit makes the man (bootblack moustache optional). Frank's inherited faith in the Image explains his compulsion to peel the labels off bottles, another form of appropriating a popular image. The labels represent brand names, Images, cultivations of identity, another form of the Yankees' pin-stripe suits and the Pan Am uniform that hides Frank from the bank manager who earlier saw right through him. Frank Sr. is a Willy Loman, destroyed by the myths of American entrepreneurship. He gives Frank his first check book so "You're in their little club." But the Rotary Club fraternity that gives him an evening's honour seduces away his wife and sends his son after hollow images of success. When Frank Jr. catches Paula with her lover, Barnes admits he'd be "in deep trouble" if he lost his President's pin. The logo makes the man but not a *mentsch*.

In the film's superb opening titles, the cartoon figures summarize the plot, ending with the FBI agent pursuing the hero across the *surface* of the globe. The lettering suggests two other themes. The high style embodies both Franks' ambitions. Second, they reach up as elastic aspiration or plunge down to fathom the depths. Confirming the layered realities, the film opens on the resurrected TV set of *To Tell the Truth*, where Kitty Carlisle Hart and MC Joe Garagiola confront two fake Frank Abagnale Jr.s, and the "real" one, our Leonardo. So, too, Frank models himself after James Bond (circa *Goldfinger*), takes an early *nomme de guerre* from *The Flash* comic books, and learns medicine and law from TV. As 1920s Hollywood worked for immigrant America, popular culture teaches the outsider how to fit himself in.

Frank's primary influence is the moral choice provided by various father figures. Frank grows from his father through two surrogates. Roger Strong is a conventionally "successful" version of Frank Sr., appearing respectable. Their moral superior is Hanratty, who lost his daughter, Grace, through divorce. Though fallen from that grace, he succeeds as a father when he properly replaces Frank's. In their one scene together, Frank Sr. tells Hanratty: "You're not a father, are you? . . . If you were, you'd know I'd never give up my son." But whereas Frank Sr. abandoned his son to false idols, Hanratty does not give up on Frank. Where Frank Sr. taught him strategies of deception (fooling himself as much as others), Hanratty teaches him diligence (in his Javertian pursuit) and honesty. "I wouldn't lie to you," he tells Frank, claiming to have a French police force waiting outside his unarmed arrest. When Hanratty enters the printing shop alone, then leads Frank out to the empty square, we suspect Hanratty did lie. But the *gendarmes* appear *en masse*; Hanratty is honest. True, he withholds news of Frank Sr.'s death and he claims a four-year-old daughter, her age when his marriage ended. "Sometimes it's easier living a lie," Hanratty admits to the pro. In Frank's conversion, which is not just to legality but to an honest presentation of his self, Hanratty achieves the paternal success his broken marriage cost him. By

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preventing Frank's marriage to Brenda Strong, Hanratty saves him from a second damaging father, another false life.

*Catch Me If You Can* is advertised as "The true story of a real fake." But as Frank Abagnale Jr. evades his rootlessness, alienation, and insecurity by professing false professions and by cultivating hollow images of success, he relives the immigrant Jew's attempt to "pass," to hide behind a mainstream respectability. The hero matures by outgrowing the false allure of conformism and WASP respectability.