

# Tom, Thanks for Catch Me If You Can

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CATCH ME IF YOU CAN (2002)

Directed by Steven Spielberg

Written by Jeff Nathanson & Frank Abagnale Jr.

Starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Christopher Walken & Tom Hanks as Carl Hanratty

You can pull off just about any scam if you have the nerve to try. Keep your hand steady, face your obstacle head on, and it will almost always bow. To learn this is to gain a dangerous amount of power; there's a fine line between confident and egoic, between resourceful and entitled. When our scams begin working, we allow these lines to blur, enabling ourselves to believe in a victimless nature of our crimes. Only, is any crime truly victimless, when the perpetrator is indeed robbing himself of implicit good?

If I can implicate my friend Kyle for a moment, I recall an afternoon in Grade 11 when, after becoming acquainted with the flexibility of law in our Canadian History class, we both asked to be excused for the bathroom at the same time. We marched swiftly for Kyle's truck, drove to my house, had a snack, picked up my acoustic guitar, and returned to class. As I remember, it went completely unnoticed we'd been missing for so long, but the guitar was undeniable when it was unpacked and strummed from the back of the room. Our classmates were not disturbed as, you can imagine, this teacher was easily exploited, and they were all too preoccupied by their own antics. Kyle and I launched into a sloppy rendition of Elton John's Your Song, after which we told the teacher we'd written it for her. She bought it and was moved to tears.

If such a thing exists, that might in fact have been a victimless crime. Thankfully, I didn't grow to push the boundaries much further. But Frank Abignale Jr. sure did. With every new successful gambit, he'd dare to stretch the truth further, always remaining a step ahead of his bungling federal hunters. Of course, even the smartest con needs lucky breaks, and if 2002's Catch Me If You Can is to be believed, Frank's the luckiest con in criminal history, and he's still living lucky today. This is the first in a long series of Leonardo DiCaprio leading roles as a morally compromised anti-hero. Having been raised and groomed by his small-time conman father (Christopher Walken), Frank Jr. leaves home at 16 and begins his life of virtuosic fraudulence. Before his 19th birthday, he cashes over four million dollars in fake checks, poses as a commercial airline pilot, a pediatric surgeon, and a Harvard & Berkeley law school graduate, and it's all (as detailed in the memoir of the same name) shockingly true... or so we're meant to believe. The fact is, all these crimes are on the record as having occurred, but the flair with which Frank conducted himself is conjecture as he's not exactly the most trustworthy source.

I stated in a previous blog that Tom Hanks has never had to take a supporting role, but that's not to say he hasn't taken one anyway when the part was right. Make no mistake, this is Leo's movie, and it's Spielberg's movie. TH, as Carl Hanratty, is just the well-meaning desk agent being driven mad by Frank's evasion. But he rides shotgun as gracefully as he drives; the Chicago accent, the harsh demeanor, the empathic respect for his rival's finesse. In spite of the notes at the end of the film, I don't believe Carl was an historically real person, but rather a composite of several FBI figures from whom the real Frank Jr. fled. This character, also from a broken family, develops to serve a pseudo-fatherly role for the fugitive, who's only ever sought a father's approval, and badly needs a father to indulge him on Christmas.

Assuming this is a story of nonfiction, it's incredible as is, and doesn't require much poetry to dress it up. It tells of the traditional unraveling of one boy's wayward ambition, leading to his ultimate redemption; Spielberg's a wizard of this linear/literal kind of storytelling. It's also based on a book by the guy it's about, we're not watching Wuthering Heights here. But there is some clever symbolism in Frank's on-going habit of peeling the labels off everything around him. Ketchup, Coca-Cola, peanut butter. For one, it's a classic nervous tick. It also represents Frank's chronic willingness to quick-change from one life to the next, always deftly slipping back into anonymity. This is how Frank detaches from the humanity of his crimes; he's not Jordan Belfort or Calvin Candie. He's sensitive to the frailty of love and trust, and so, when cornered, he does come clean about his identity to his fiance Brenda (Amy Adams). But, having dug a hole so deep, he's forced to disappear and transform again. It's the only way to rationalize the fact that his crimes are no longer victimless.

At the heart of every clot of nerve is disrespect. Frank cheats the system because he has no respect for it, the same way Kyle and I had no respect for our history teacher. Frank and Kyle and I were in the wrong, but there is such a thing as *deserving* respect. Though ideologically different in every way, Frank and Carl are bonded by the default of a father-son dynamic that's thrust upon them, a dynamic that can't sustain without mutual respect. Near the end of *Catch Me If You Can*, Frank has another opportunity to run away, and sensing this, Carl heads him off. They share a final pep-talk before Carl tells him, "Frank, look, nobody's chasing you," and he leaves. You can't force a person you respect to respect you back, you can only hope they will. After years attempting to tame this kid, dropping the ball every step of the way, Carl's great test of nerve is to yield and simply hope for the best.

I won't spoil it any further except to say that it wouldn't be a Christmas movie if not for a happy ending, and if you haven't seen it before or in a long time, watch it soon, before the season's run off again.

Thx!