

Can You Ever Forgive Me?

Melissa McCarthy, proud portrayer of the loudmouth and practitioner of the pratfall, takes an intriguing new tack in “Can You Ever Forgive Me?” playing a wily fraudster. It turns out she makes a convincing charlatan, clever enough to take in experts in the autograph collecting trade.

Based on an autobiography, “Can You Ever Forgive Me?” tells the story of Lee Israel, a New York writer of celebrity biographies (Tallulah Bankhead, Katherine Hepburn, etc.) who’s well has dried up by 1991. Her shabby West Side apartment is behind on the rent, and she has only a feline for company. “I’m a 51-year-old woman who likes cats better than people,” she states.

Trying to pitch her latest effort (a bio of comedienne Fanny Brice), Lee gets strong pushback from her agent Marjorie (Jane Curtin), who sourly suggests that Israel seek another line of work. Trolling a library book on Brice, she discovers an original letter written by the actress, which she tries to sell to a local bookshop run by Anna (Dolly Wells). Advised that the autograph is sales worthy, she is also told that the text is anodyne and would sell for more with some distinctive element. Enticed by the prospect, Lee confects a fake—and clever—postscript, which she peddles for serious cash.

Thus, she begins inventing (on various typewriters) cunning letters from famous authors, Noel Coward and Dorothy Parker, *inter alia*, and receives comfortable cash payments to bolster her life and her ego. A chance meeting with a gay lay-about, Jack Hock (Richard T. Grant), in her local watering hole proves positive in that he encourages her in her fraud and becomes a drinking buddy. The ruse bolsters them both, until it doesn’t, when one collector questions the authenticity of one of her notes. Feeling vulnerable with her normal sources, she enlists the daffy Jack to stand in for her. Their continuing scam effort does not go well...

The film, directed by Marielle Heller, is pitched down, both in its muted actions and its amber to brown tones, as befits the subject of a failing drunk living out a life at the typewriter and hanging out in saloons. Yet she has Jack Hock, personified trippingly by Grant, a vagrant will-of-the-wisp, a garrulous Brit up for a main chance or a lark, but utterly irresponsible and exhibiting the attention span of a fly. When Lee gives him the simple task of looking out for her apartment for a few days, you know he will mess up big time. His principal gift in life—which Lee comes to appreciate—is being a good bar mate.

McCarthy’s comic persona here is caustic and sardonic, appropriate to a woman who has always been alone (and preferred it that way) and now sees her livelihood threatened and her creative self quashed. A particularly poignant display of self-awareness comes when she testifies at her own trial, both recognizing her crimes yet still viewing them as offering the most inventive writing of her career (“I’m not copying, I’m creating”), a realization that the real Lee Israel came to recognize in herself. This tough gal may not be laugh-out-loud funny but should win many wry smiles.

(Now in theaters, the film is rated “R” for language and runs for 106 mins.)