

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

Directed by Steven Spielberg
Produced by Walter F. Parks and Steven Spielberg
Distributed by DreamWorks Pictures
Released in 2002

This is not *fluff*. Just because it betrays a nostalgia for the pre-hippie '60s, *Catch Me If You Can* is dismissed as entertaining froth. But there's a lot more going on here.

As a prelude, consider the three sex scenes (or *sexual* scenes):

In the first, Frank seduces a stewardess. Sex is fun, his manhood is secured, and the pleasures of the jet set dazzle his senses. He's enthralled.

In the second scene, Frank is at the height of his powers. When a five-star hooker spots dapper Frank in the hallway of their hotel, she's not just targeting a big spender. She wants him—we know this because Dusty Springfield's version of "The Look of Love" opens with the turn of Cheryl's high-heeled foot. Since she's attracted to him, Cheryl is trying to have her cake and eat it too, by charging him when she'd like to have sex anyway. Frank seems justified in his double-cross, as he nets \$400 for himself. Sex is about power, and Frank is in total control. For nothing, he has everything.

By the third scene, those heady days of bankrupt living have passed. Frank, in his Dr. Connor guise, acknowledges Brenda's hesitant response to his bedside manner. He tells her he can wait. With her subsequent account of abortion and disownment, Frank realizes that sex is serious. He can't leave *this* girl.

And maybe Brenda could be his last best chance to get it all back.

Frank Abagnale lost a treasured life. As the only child of a well-off New Rochelle shopkeeper, he grew up nurtured and loved. And nothing made him happier than seeing his parents happy.

With the Abagnales' subsequent economic freefall, Frank kept his bearings. But soon Frank was faced with a lamentable choice—pick a parent.

It's appropriate that the marriage end in the bedroom. That's the room where Paula committed adultery with Jack Barnes, giving her body up in hopes, perhaps, of regaining her cherished status in society. Her husband never cared much about such things. Mom's all facade, and Dad's all fight. Frank's an amalgam of them both.

He refuses to make a choice, but runs away, living on his wits, and finding his salvation in a New York minute. Posing as an airline pilot, Frank, while pulling a fast one on all the banks that stuck it to his old man, also finds respectability. He could sell any lie, and charm any sucker. (As an aside, the fact that something like this really happened makes suspending one's disbelief a lot easier.)

Despite Frank's earnest striving, there's no getting the family back together. And so he resolves to make a family of his own, with Brenda.

In Frank's eyes, with social prestige, money, and a happy marriage, the Strongs are the archetype of idyllic living. Despite his unfamiliarity with Mitch Miller sing-alongs, Frank is

soon part of the family. With an assistant D.A. job and forthcoming wedding, life is good. But evading the law requires mobility. If he settles down, he's got to call a truce.

As Frank sees his would-be parents-in-law swaying to Judy Garland's "Embraceable You," he gets to thinking about the old days. (It's the same song his parents danced to after Frank, Sr. became a lifetime member of the Rotary Club.) Heading back north, he tracks his father down in a bar.

It's been said before, but Christopher Walken's performance is mesmerizing. His character is a conflicted Everyman who is eternally optimistic, resents the easy ways of the rich, cherishes his only son, and revels in his life's defining moment—seeing Paula for the first time, in 1944. His pride in the accomplishment of winning her hand is a testament to her value in his eyes. He's not boastful, he's thankful; but he doesn't recognize the weak foundations of his marriage—wartime bride in a foreign culture, a baby boy for distraction, and a husband's steady rise to success. Their marriage, in its nineteen years, has never been tested.

Walken plays the beginning of the film with a wicked glint, but after his character loses Paula, his eyes are haunted and sad. When Frank greets his father, Walken turns around and looks at DiCaprio with a vacant expression, neither interested, reproachful, happy, or sad. He's alive, but the life has all been sucked out of him. Through the film we see hints of his movie persona—the deranged eccentric—but it's mostly unfulfilled expectation, just like his character's life. Walken plays Frank, Sr. like a dangerous animal stripped of its teeth. There's no threat, but, still, you can't help feeling sad. Casting Walken, against type, was an outrageous and inspired decision.

Though their reunion is a little awkward, the two men still share a deep affection. But with a one-two punch, Frank, Sr. tells his son that the government is on to him and that there's no getting back with Paula—she married "my friend" Jack Barnes (notice Frank, Sr. never says an unkind word about either of them). More than ever, Frank wants it to stop—after all, now he'll never be able to "[get] it all back." He wants his dad to understand, but Frank, Sr. says, enigmatically, "You can't stop." It's another double-whammy, for it means that Frank, Sr. would rather his son keep ripping down The System from within, despite the pain it causes, just to make a statement. (Remember that Frank, Sr. has just told his son that he plans to make the IRS chase him "for the rest of their lives.") It also means that there is no stopping, that even if Frank, Jr. really wanted to change, he would always live the life of a man on the run. Because as soon as he stops, he has to, as the hotel proprietor directed Frank after ejecting him in the middle of the night, "go home." But Frank has no home, not really, and as long as he keeps running, he, paradoxically, maintains the hope that he can get his parents back together while simultaneously denying that anything has changed.

Carl Handratty would understand that later. But for now, this tireless pursuer won't let up. He corners Frank in New Orleans, only to be given the shake.

Thus Brenda, who traded her terrible truths for Frank's soothing lies, is employed to betray her man. She probably didn't have much of a choice, but still, Frank is devastated. Just as he has betrayed so many hundreds, now he, too, is a victim.

Dodging Carl's trap, he resolves to leave Miami on his own terms, staging his most elaborate hoax. For a second time, Carl has egg on his face.

Director Spielberg shot the film in only 56 days, which is mind-blowing when one considers the quality of the production design. He shot at least two scenes in New York City, taking everything away that wasn't right for the period, and ensuring that every extra had the right tie, the right hat, all the ladies' hair was perfectly elevated, and the automobiles were vintage. Not as logistically difficult, but no less time consuming, countless indoor sequences have just the right shading of rose-colored nostalgia. The Atlanta bachelor pad; the Strongs' New Orleans mansion; the creaking New Rochelle apartment; FBI headquarters; the Hollywood motel; Dr. Connor's hospital office and, best of all, TWA's retro-futuristic Eero Saarinen-designed JFK terminal; are each, perfect. All the furnishings, all the electronics, all the typewriters, all the clothes—perfect, if one notices. But there's nothing incongruous about it, nothing to take us out of the story. These sets are not vehicles for reminiscence, but stages where our characters can play out their lives.

And they've got good dialogue to work with. The scene where Frank has caught his mother with Jack Barnes is brilliant because Paula tries to elicit the intentions of her son without revealing her own duplicity, even as she is being, in her speech, duplicitous!

As she nervously lights a cigarette and sets about making her son a sandwich, her conversation addresses Jack's idea of suing the government, while indirectly referencing the liaison Frank is suspecting and Paula is hiding. ("You're not going to tell...are you?" / "No." / "That's right. There's nothing to tell.") This way, she can avoid an uncomfortable topic, counting on the fact that if Frank does suspect something was going on, he'll know she was referring to the liaison, but if he doesn't know something, she won't be telling him inadvertently. She talks about going to see "some old friends from the tennis club" and that when she returns they'll all have dinner together (like nothing happened). As she dismisses the idea of Frank, Sr. suing the government, she is implicitly acknowledging that she thinks her husband is all washed-up, which, of course, is the reason she was in the bedroom with Jack.

The scene ends with Paula trying to bribe Frank into keeping quiet. But Frank gets the last word by jerking the cigarette from her lips with, "You promised you were going to quit." And then he slams the door.

Paula's final appearance comes after Frank has executed his last daring escape. Six years have passed since Jack Barnes came to visit. This scene, which channels Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There, is the most surreal and heartbreaking of *Catch Me If You Can*.

The revelations pile on top of each other. The girl who meets Frank at the window has an angelically dispassionate countenance. She's Frank's half-sister. And his mother is perfectly content without him, having made a new life for herself, with a brand-new family. No more broken-down husband or criminal son. No, she has a rich lawyer and a little angel.

Frank could be happy for his mother, but he must be angry, too. How can his dad have suffered so, then tragically died? How could Frank, who became a criminal to escape the consequences of Paula's infidelity, now be minutes from incarceration? How can she stay so detached when she was the cause of it all?

With tears in his eyes, Frank surrenders to the authorities, and to reality. There's nowhere else to run.

Carl spent many frustrating years trying to get a handle on Frank. But the smarter Frank is, the better Carl looks. That's why the ending is a triumph.

Interestingly, Carl Handratty is the antagonist, and Frank is the protagonist, but the antagonist is on the right side of the law. In the end, the pair meet in the middle—Frank settling down to a life of crime fighting with the FBI, and Carl acknowledging that he, like Frank, hasn't been honest with the world, projecting a hard-bitten image to conceal the hurt of his own family's split.

Earlier in the film, when he wanted it all to end, Frank had opined, "Stop chasing me," to which Carl replied, with resignation, "I can't stop." But now, after tailing Frank to New York, Carl, with his career on the line, and his worry for Frank's welfare barely hidden, lets go. It was the only way to bring Frank down to earth.

Maybe Frank can find more satisfaction stopping crooks than being one, himself.

So Carl watches the time inch by, with every passing minute more aware that he's been given the slip for a third and final time. In the middle of a group meeting on an Arizona forger, a figure approaches and, with authority, takes away the magnifying lens. Carl, to his profound relief, looks up to see Frank. Amusingly, once Frank starts to deconstruct the forged check, the rest of the agents slink away—Frank is so good that there's nothing they can do to help. Might as well work on something else.

Carl, with awe and puzzlement, switches topics, asking how Frank passed the Louisiana bar exam. Carl has waited long enough. He deserves to know.

For once, Frank didn't cheat. He passed it legitimately—but with only two weeks study!

Frank's admission is the greatest compliment he could give Carl. Someone as smart as Frank would leave any other agent in the dust. But Handratty got his man.

Carl, amazed that he's finally getting an answer, and it's *this* answer, asks, "Is that the truth, Frank?" But Frank, to preserve the mystery, turns back to their Arizona quarry.

They resolve to catch him, together.