

In the Register of *Ka-ching!*

With *The Hoax*, Swedish director Lasse Hallstrom and his screenwriter, William Wheeler, have at long last given Clifford Irving his due. They have done so by portraying their subject with about as much honesty as Irving did Howard Hughes when he concocted his infamous fake autobiography of the billionaire. They have altered, misshaped, abridged, and invented. In short, they have lied, exuberantly. While I've frequently chided directors and writers for such shenanigans, I cannot stir myself to moral indignation in this case. By thumbing their noses at the facts, Hallstrom and Wheeler have aspired to a higher truthiness, as Stephen Colbert might say. Their narrative method can be understood as a gloss on Irving's own fusion of reckless imagination and shameless chutzpah. As such, it pays fitting tribute to a literary scoundrel while exposing the dunces in high places who allowed him to get as far as he did.

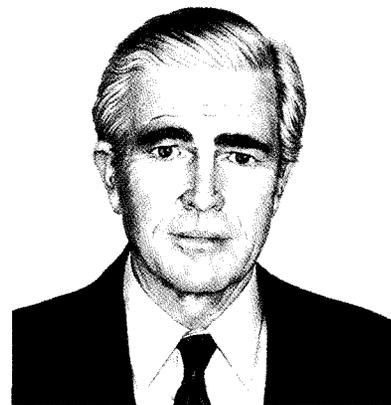
Playing Irving, Richard Gere sets the tone of this satire when he explains to his friend and accomplice Richard Suskind (Alfred Molina) how he conned the editors at McGraw-Hill and *Time*. His technique is simplicity itself. "The more outrageous I sound," he gleefully confides, "the more convincing I am!"

Of course, compared to Irving, Hallstrom and Wheeler are pikers in the lying department, but they have tried admirably. They portray Irving in 1971 as a financially strapped novelist about to be evicted from his Upstate New York home. Undaunted by looming indigence, he dons a tuxedo to attend Truman Capote's masked Black and White Ball at the Plaza Hotel, where he meets his editor, played by the winsomely elegant Hope Davis. She takes the festive occasion to inform him that his latest manuscript, *Rudnick's Problem*, has been rejected. She doesn't say why, but we are left to infer that it is because it's such a transparent attempt to cash in on Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. To add to Irving's gathering gloom, he glimpses his former and still ominous mistress Nina von Pallandt, the singing baroness, across the celebrity-crowded room. All this is presented in a skillfully marshaled montage orchestrated to

make Irving's plunge into charlatanism seem all but inevitable. There is a slight difficulty, however: None of it is true. As of 1971, Irving had been residing on the Mediterranean island of Ibiza for nine years, and he was reasonably well off. As for Capote's party, it was held five years earlier, in 1966. Furthermore, as far as I can discover, Irving never tried his hand—his literary hand, that is—at Portnoy's enthusiasm.

Why these deviations from the truth? I can only think that Wheeler was impatient with the reality. He wanted an Irving driven by economic desperation and goaded by being just outside the literary world's magic showroom, his nose flattened against its glittering pane. This would seem to make for a better story. But, as so often happens, the truth is far more interesting. Irving had been publishing with McGraw-Hill for 12 years, had cultivated good relations with his editors, and had recently signed a four-book contract. He had every reason to expect a successful future. Yet he preferred to gamble these enviable prospects on a lunatic criminal venture that promised shaky odds at best. Why?

I recall being puzzled by the affair when the news first broke in. How, I had wondered, did Irving expect to get away with it? Prompted by the film, I've done a little research and now see how a clever but fatally self-absorbed New York wise guy could be mightily tempted to perpetrate such a scam. First, the mysterious Hughes was hot, profitable copy. There were three biographies of the aviator turned womanizing showman written between 1967 and 1971, each woven from generally available information, tabloid gossip, and sordid speculation. Second, Hughes hadn't made a public appearance or statement since 1957. Only an inner circle of his upper-echelon employees knew with any certainty where he was living, and many of his factotums hadn't seen him face to face for over a decade. Third—and this is crucial—Irving had hit the mother lode of genuine Hughesiana. He had stolen the unpublished memoirs of Hughes' former chief executive officer, the 80-year-old Noah Dietrich, who had worked for the



The Hoax

Produced and distributed
by Miramax Films

Directed by Lasse Hallstrom
Screenplay by William Wheeler

great man for 32 years and knew where the bodies were buried. Fourth, Hughes was rumored to be near death. This last detail almost certainly clinched the matter. Irving must have calculated that, once Hughes had taken off on his final flight, there would be no one who could convincingly debunk his as-told-to autobiography.

Let's not overlook the fabulously foolish executives at McGraw-Hill. On this score, Wheeler's script shines with a wicked sheen. Despite initial doubts and ongoing suspicions, these ladies and gentlemen became the unwitting—or is that witless?—co-conspirators in Irving's fraud. The first to fall under Irving's spell was his editor, a Chinese-American woman whom the film has unaccountably transformed into a disconcertingly round-eyed Davis. When she learns that Irving has reeled in the Big Kahuna, she chortles hyperbolically that "this book will sell more copies than the Bible." Like so many in her industry, she's clearly convinced that sales volume is the only criterion for a book's worth. Harold McGraw, aging grandson of the McGraw who founded the house, has doubts about the project, however. Although a professional handwriting analyst has certified the authenticity of Irving's forged letters from Hughes to himself, he's put off by the fictional Hughes's supposed demands for more and more money. (Once Irving thought he had the publishing house hooked, he couldn't resist having his imaginary Hughes escalate his original demand for \$400,000 to

\$1 million, the check to be transmitted to him by Irving himself since, of course, Hughes wasn't about to reveal his whereabouts. "It's sleazy," McGraw complains to the company's CEO, Shelton Fisher (a marvelously calculating Stanley Tucci). McGraw then makes what seems at first a needless declaration: "I'm a publisher." But this is not a job description. He is invoking the moral standards to which his trade is supposedly committed. Made of sterner stuff, Fisher all but yawns in McGraw's face. "You're an employee, Harold," he reminds the older man, belittlingly. "Roll the presses." And so they did—only to become book burners when the truth emerged. Here is the film's satiric target: The hypocritical calculus with which modern publishing balances morality with greed. Hallstrom has made of Irving a lens to expose this deliciously unsavory stew of everyday corruption among both the knowing and the deluded. His film reminds us that publishers, as their title implies, exert enormous control over our public discourse. It is not surprising, then, that they should be jealous of their power and strive to protect their prerogatives under a mantle of moral seriousness, especially when they are most devoted to turning a buck. At all costs, they must be believed. How else can they prevent the public from snickering unprofitably at the ghost-written ruminations to be found in the Oprah-endorsed memoirs of our political leaders, each a study in studied sincerity?

Hallstrom has been exceptionally well served by his cast. Richard Gere creates a five-foot-ten version of the six-foot-four Irving, thus implicitly cutting him down to size. I've never thought much of Gere as an actor. Perhaps this is because of the roles he has chosen. He has always seemed to me to emanate a sleazy self-assurance that's as much personal as thespian. He reminds me of a clever *roué* who is just self-regarding enough to remain unscathed by his debaucheries. But here, made to resemble Irving under a kinked coiffure and behind an enlarged proboscis, Gere uses his slippery persona to great effect. He makes Irving the kind of liar who is so obvious that you can't help doubting your instinctive distrust. No one would be quite so brazen. His Irving is a manipulative wonder, spinning stories of meeting Hughes in Mexico and Puerto Rico, which we watch unfold in hue-drained color-film stock, suggesting the source of these scenes to be the more shadowy recesses of his lar-

cenous brain.

One scene perfectly reveals Irving's devious showmanship. He's at McGraw-Hill's offices with his accomplice Suskind, talking up his interviews with Hughes. As if from nowhere, Suskind interrupts Irving while he's in full fictional tilt. "Prune," Suskind blurts. The general conversation ceases as every eye turns toward him. "He gave me a prune," he continues unhelpfully, staring back at the puzzled faces. After an awkward pause, Irving smoothly resumes control. When they met Hughes in Mexico, he explains, they found the hypochondriacal billionaire sitting cross-legged on his net-tented bed, from which dais he lectured them on the virtues of organic produce, offering Suskind a single prune to prove his point.

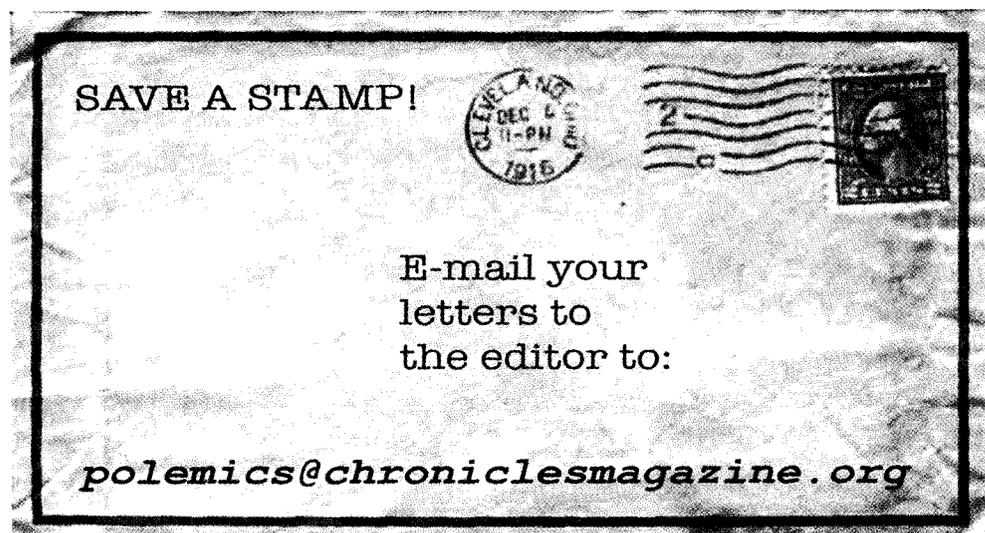
Although Suskind helped Irving pull off his scam, he was never in the same league as a supposed friend. Irving hustled him into his scheme to do the donkey work of research. Accordingly, Molina plays Suskind as a comical plodder hopelessly out of step with the glib Irving. This makes Suskind the perfect foil to reveal Irving's talent for the scam, and Molina has seized the opportunity to provide the film's biggest laughs. At the same time, Hallstrom never lets the fun obscure what a bastard Irving is—a man who does not hesitate to fast-talk his slow-witted friend into taking part in his high-stakes criminal plot. Nor does Irving scruple to involve his wife, Edith (Marcia Gay Harden). She's a Swiss national, and he makes use of her to set up a bank account in Geneva under the name H.R. Hughes, so she can cash the advance checks McGraw-Hill draws to the phantom Hughes. For their assistance, Suskind and Edith were convicted along with Irving. Suskind did

5 months; Edith, 14; Irving, 17.

Irving, of course, is a survivor. Undeterred by his disgrace, he has gone on to publish novels and journalism, including *The Hoax*, the account of the Hughes affair that Hallstrom has used for his film. What's more, you can visit his website and download the offending tome itself, *The Autobiography of Howard Hughes*, for \$5.95. I've scanned the opening chapters, which Irving has graciously made available for free. They seem to me so self-evidently fraudulent that I'm amazed the McGraw-Hill brass didn't do time alongside their errant author for the crime of willfully believing him. Irving repeatedly quotes his Hughes so as to build a firewall between the book and suspicions of fraud. He has Hughes insist on absolute secrecy, firmly establishing that no one in his company, none of his attorneys or advisors, is to know anything about the project. Quite convenient. Then, more entertainingly, there are the passages in which Irving compares himself to Hughes in order to celebrate his own accomplishments as an author and a man. "We were both tall—Hughes nearly six foot three and I an inch taller. Tall men instinctively understand each other's physical stance, the still-living memory of adolescent awkwardness, the vulnerability." Nice touch, that taller.

Elsewhere, we're treated to Hughes' assessment of Irving. "You're an outsider, of a sort—a kind of cultivated maverick. . . . That's probably why I get along with you. I have to like any man who goes his own way."

How could the McGraw-Hill people not have heard in Irving's self-infatuated grandiosity the voice of a venal fabulist? Easy. Their ears were ringing with the sound a well-fed register makes: *Ka-ching!*



by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Witness Un-Protection Program

Abdul Kahn's face had remained entirely expressionless throughout the forty-five minutes required to get the wireless router that connected the three computers in the house back up and running, yet Héctor felt as certain that he had been recognized by the other man as he was in making his own identification.

He'd experienced an excruciating three-quarters of an hour, therefore, tinkering with the settings on each of the three machines, the router, and the cable modem, while endeavoring never to turn his back on Kahn while he worked, keeping him in sight at all times. Even so, he was expecting, at any moment, an ornate dagger in the back, a jeweled scimitar across the base of the neck. Who knew how many terrorists were numbered in this cell, and whether there might be others lurking in the rest of the house, around corners and in the darkened hallway? The place resembled exactly the grim dens whose images were broadcast periodically by Al Jazeera after a kidnapping followed by a threat of beheading: blankets pinned behind the windows; minimal furniture; bare, grimed walls; a few thin bamboo mats scattered about on the floor; and, off in the corners here and there, a hookah or a cezve surrounded by cups and saucers. Had Héctor been familiar with "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," the house might have reminded him of the brigands' cave in the forest, minus the heaps of treasure. As for Kahn, he seemed equally determined to keep the repairman under close surveillance, hovering so close at times that Héctor was able to catch the thin odor of water-strained tobacco in the matted beard growing about the long, yellow teeth. Without doubt, these computers harbored among them evidence of a multitude of satanic plots and schemes aimed at destroying America and spreading Islam throughout the world. One careless move on his part—one accidental flicker of the screen exposing dark secrets never intended for his eyes, or those of any other infidel—and the next instant, his head would be rolling among the coffee things on the floor. Still, he completed his work without mishap, wrote out a bill for the job, and accepted payment in cash from

Kahn, escaping the house with no damage beyond the burning imprint of the *jihadista's* dark, expressionless eyes upon his soul.

Immediately upon leaving No. 11 Callista Street, Héctor canceled his remaining afternoon appointments and drove directly to the police station, where he gave his story to the deputy chief—Saenz was gone from the office that afternoon—and demanded that he and his family be placed immediately in the Witness Protection Program. The deputy, a pudgy Anglo named Corcoran with a roll of fat at the back of his neck and poured into a too-tight uniform, looked bored as he heard him out, seemingly unimpressed by his account. The request for protection he dismissed with what seemed to Héctor unnecessary contempt.

"WPP is for the really *big fish*," Deputy Chief Corcoran informed him. "We'll check your story out, buddy, and decide if you're one of them, or ain't." His small sneer and sarcastic tone suggested he himself had little doubt on that score.

Héctor, who'd expected his timely witness to be more than sufficient to prevent another catastrophic terrorist strike on the Rio Grande, was appalled by this laconic response.

"But it *had* to have been Kahn and his friend who fired the Qassam at the Taberna," he protested. "Those computers I worked on are probably connected with other terrorist cells—maybe even Al Qaeda itself! And what if me and my wife and kids get blown to bits by *another* rocket before you guys get around to checking out my story? What you need to do is round up a couple of men and go over there to Callista Street—*pronto*—and have a look for yourselves!"

Deputy Chief Corcoran's gaze was now definitely hostile.

"You ever hear of any such thing as a search warrant, *Señor Villa*? This ain't Mexico, you know. Cops can't go around arresting illegal immigrants on our own. That's the federal government's job, even if they don't do nothing about it. What do you think the ACLU would do to us if we up and grabbed this guy on just anybody's say-so?"

On the way out of the station, though



he took the paper at home, Héctor deposited a quarter in the box and extracted a copy of the *Valencia County News-Bulletin*. The photo above the fold showed the Taberna Aztlán as a smoldering ruin, and the lead story described plans to rebuild the place on location behind a defiant façade inset with 1,776 beer bottles cemented in rows. "Millions for tribute, not one cent for protection," he thought sardonically. It was a phrase he'd come across soon after crossing the border and remembered ever since. It had the genuine American ring to it, Héctor thought, like the Gettysburg Address or the Liberty Bell. He was highly disappointed in Deputy Chief Corcoran's thoroughly un-American response in the course of their interview.

His own first impulse in the crisis had been to do whatever was in his power to protect his country. Having fulfilled that duty, Héctor felt that his immediate responsibility now was for the preservation of his family—apparently, without the aid and cooperation of the law. For the moment, he hadn't the slightest idea how this task was to be accomplished, while whatever plan he decided on was certain to meet with the hysterical reaction of his wife when she learned that the Villas were in actual, rather than potential, danger. As he needed to inform Jesús "Eddie" at once of his run-in with Abdul Kahn and unsympathetic reception by the deputy police chief, Héctor thought he would use the occasion to seek his friend's advice on protecting his family. Possibly Jesús "Eddie" would feel some alarm on his own behalf, but Héctor doubted it. Nor did he find alarm justified, since, the more Kahn tried to recall what Héctor's companion at the Taberna Aztlán had looked like, the more likely he was to see Héctor—and only Héctor—seated there among shadows in the