

# The Hoax (2006)

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 1; L- 3; S/N-4 . Running time: 1 hour 56 min.

*Transgression speaks to the wicked  
deep in their hearts;  
there is no fear of God  
before their eyes.*

*For they flatter themselves in their own eyes  
that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated.  
The words of their mouths are mischief and deceit;  
they have ceased to act wisely and do good.*

*Psalms 36:1-3*

There are no heroes in Lasse Hallstrom (director) and William Wheeler's (screenwriter)

morality tale. What small amount of sympathy Richard Gere evokes within us for the writer Clifford Irving is quickly dissipated by his desperate scheme to gain the fame, money, and power that he feels slipping from his grasp when a deal for his latest novel turns sour. Irving's research associate Dick Susskind (Alfred Molina) reluctantly goes along with the hoax, at least for a while, as does Irving's artist wife Edith (Marcia Gay Harden), with whom he has become reconciled after an affair with a sultry baroness, Nina Van Pallandt (Julie Delpy).

Just when it looks as if Irving will break into the big time with a lucrative deal with McGraw-Hill, a major critic, to whom a mss. copy had been sent, responds with a scathing review of the novel. When his editor Andrea Tate (Hope Davis) tells him that the contract is being cancelled, Irving announces that he is working on "the book of the century." She and McGraw-Hill Shelton Fisher (Stanley Tucci) become very excited when they are told that he has gained access to reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes to write an autobiography.

What follows bears out the claim of Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels that if one tells a big lie and keeps repeating it, people will believe it.

Irving cleverly forges a handwritten note, purportedly from Hughes, that passes the scrutiny of handwriting experts. Armed with this and some fake phone calls from Hughes, Irving is able to gain a contract from the publisher. At one point when, goaded by the suspicious editor of LIFE Magazine, who has the serial rights, the publishers' belief in Irving's veracity wanes, Irving fakes outrage so convincingly that he raises the deal to a cool one million dollars. Thus, as we were drawn to admire the conmen of *The Sting*, so we become fascinated with the dexterous machinations of Irving. He is also incredibly lucky, as he goes to visit Hughes' former CEO Noah Dietrich (Eli Wallach) and discovers he is working on his memoirs, which contain all sorts of secrets of Hughes' personal life and business dealings. Irving sends Susskind off to make a copy of the mss. while he pretends to be reading it in order to help Dietrich get into publishable form. Then, telling the businessman that it was so poorly written that nothing could save it, Irving and his partner leave, armed with the priceless information that will convince the skeptical that his book is genuine.

Just as the author of Psalm has give us a good description of a man like Irving, so the writer of Psalm 9 provides us with an outline of his fate: The Lord has made himself known, he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. (v. 16)

Well, not quite. Our society is such that when a conman is notorious enough, he can expect to do right well, once he goes through a period of punishment. TV talk show hosts are all too happy to have the reformed as guests, baring their souls and former sins. Disgraced TV evangelists have regained their ministries; politicians convicted of corruption have come back to power, or tried to, and writers like Irving have gained

lucrative contracts by writing about their crimes, the book on which this film is based being a case in point.

## **For Reflection/Discussion**

Note: The following contains a spoiler or two.

1) How did you feel about Irving as the story unfolded? Did this change? Why do you think we sometimes are led to root for swindlers and cheats? Is there, as the saying goes, “a bit of larceny in all of us” ?

2) How does the larceny in the publishers contribute to their acceptance of Irving’s claims despite all the warning signs suggesting that he is lying?

3) How does Susskind serve as a moral compass for Irving? How is he an example of what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” ? (Rom. 7:19)

4) What other examples of deceit have been brought to light during the recent past? In journalism; in politics; in religion?

5) One of the fascinating claims in the book deals with Hughes’ playing along with Irving and using him to get back at President Nixon: what do you think of this claim? Factual, or something made up by the author?

6) What do you think of the ability of such charlatans to re-enter society and profit by telling stories of their misdeeds? What does this reveal about our society? What instances of deception have you fallen prey to? How do we justify the small deceptions that we indulge in—lies and excuses about not accepting an invitation; excuses for not paying a bill or meeting a work or school deadline; the use of other peoples’ writing on the internet for school papers; the help parents give their children for a school project; and—?

7) The psalmist is shored up by his faith in a God of truth and justice: do you see any evidence of such faith in Irving? What do you think he believes in?