

Can You Ever Forgive Me?

Memoirs of
a Literary Forger

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Lee Israel

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Now a major motion picture starring Melissa McCarthy—Lee Israel's hilarious and shocking memoir of the astonishing caper she carried on for almost two years when she forged and sold more than three hundred letters by such literary notables as Dorothy Parker, Edna Ferber, Noel Coward, and many others.

Before turning to her life of crime—running a one-woman forgery business out of a phone booth in a Greenwich Village bar and even dodging the FBI—Lee Israel had a legitimate career as an author of biographies. Her first book on Tallulah Bankhead was a *New York Times* bestseller, and her second, on the late journalist and reporter Dorothy Kilgallen, made a splash in the headlines.

But by 1990, almost broke and desperate to hang onto her Upper West Side studio, Lee made a bold and irreversible career change: inspired by a letter she'd received once from Katharine Hepburn, and armed with her considerable skills as a researcher and celebrity biographer, she began to forge letters in the voices of literary greats. Between 1990 and 1991, she wrote more than three hundred letters in the voices of, among others, Dorothy Parker, Louise Brooks, Edna Ferber, Lillian Hellman, and Noel Coward—and sold the forgeries to memorabilia and autograph dealers.

“Lee Israel is deft, funny, and eminently entertaining...[in her] gentle parable about the modern culture of fame, about those who worship it, those who strive for it, and those who trade in its relics” (The Associated Press). Exquisitely written, with reproductions of her marvelous forgeries, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* is “a slender, sordid, and pretty damned fabulous book about her misadventures” (*The New York Times Book Review*).

Can You Ever Forgive Me?: Memoirs of a Literary Forger Details

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Grace says

Yesterday, I found myself in the waiting room of a dealership waiting for a minor repair to be completed on my car (thank goodness for the warranty - I walked out of there paying nothing!). While seated in a surprisingly comfortable blue pleather chair, I read Lee Israel's "Can You Ever Forgive Me?: Memoirs of a Literary Forger." It was a short paperback and I was at the dealership less than two hours. While it made the time pass, for which I am grateful, it left a lot to be desired. As I turned page after page, most of them with reproductions of her forgeries, I couldn't help but wonder if this short memoir was written for no other reason than for Israel, who surely had money problems, to cash in on her crimes and become solvent? It seemed hastily written and for someone who began her early writing career writing biographies, you'd think that she would have known readers would want more than what she put on the page. I was disappointed. I wanted more of who she was, how she spiraled into a life of lies, alcoholism, and literary crime. She discussed her feelings about being on welfare, but she could have given us so much more by recounting her time actually applying for welfare or how she spent her first welfare check. She talked about suffering from anxiety. How did she keep her anxiety in check during her crime spree?

Unfortunately, author Lee Israel passed away in 2014 so I won't have any answers to my questions from her. However, the story of Ms. Israel's life is an upcoming movie starring Melissa McCarthy. I have a feeling that this will be one of the rare instances in which the movie is better than the book.

Ronnie Cramer says

You'll need a shower after reading this brief autobiographical account of literary theft and forgery. Yes, the writing is good; as noted elsewhere, the perp is/was a 'real' author. She's also unapologetic, unsympathetic and immensely unlikable.

Oriana says

This is a nice little memoir. It's very short, but really well written – as it should be, considering that Israel is a very accomplished, bestselling writer.

The story goes: Israel wrote several biographies and became a bit of a sensation. She made piles of money, and was schmoozed with martini lunches by much of the literati. Then she wrote a tell-all about Estee Lauder, which bombed. Then the hot-shot editors were suddenly always in meetings when she called. Accustomed to the high life (and a bit of an alcoholic, it seems), she was unable to adjust to this downturn. She spent all her money. Suddenly she couldn't even afford to take her elderly sick cat to the vet. So she began – more or less innocently, at first – selling famous writers' letters to memorabilia dealers. First she sold a few legit ones, which had been written to her, in her better days. But one of the dealers implied that these were awfully tame letters, and that a bit of scandal fetched a better price. So she began embellishing slightly, adding spicy postscripts to legitimate letters, and making more money that way. Soon she began

inventing the letters altogether. She says, fascinatingly: "My success as a forger was somehow in sync with my erstwhile success as a biographer: I had for decades practiced a kind of merged identity with my subjects; to say I 'channelled' is only a slight exaggeration."

Lee forged some four hundred letters before she got caught, letters from Nöel Coward, Dorothy Parker, Edna Ferber, Louise Brooks, &c. Some of the letters are included in the book, and many more are excerpted, along with details of her creative process, which included about twenty different typewriters, stealing old letterhead and paper from Rare Book Rooms in university libraries, and obsessive reading up on her subjects. Eventually, of course, the dealers begin to get wise; one blackmails her for her silence, while she is blacklisted from most of the others. She then hatches part two of her scheme, which, of course, only winds up getting the FBI on her trail.

So yes, it's definitely an enjoyable little book. I think I'd have loved it even more if I was more familiar with the subjects of her forgeries, so I could really appreciate the turns of phrase and tone she endowed them with. But on the whole, nicely done.

Cindy Burnett says

This book is an interesting read. Written by Lee Israel herself, she details how she managed to forge over 300 letters (attributing them to Noel Coward, Dorothy Parker, and numerous others) and successfully sell them to renowned experts across the United States. Once the forgery business starts to get dicey, Israel ups her game to stealing letters from college library collections including Columbia and Yale. Eventually, her crimes catch up with her, and her business screeches to a halt. Israel includes numerous letters in the book and provides details on her exhaustive research necessary to forge the letters and what she borrowed and what she simply made up. *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* is a quick and fascinating read.

Jennifer says

This book is quality writing, that is why I'm giving this 4 stars. I can't give it 5 stars because if what she did. She was a NYT bestselling author and she resorted to forging letters to earn money? She didn't even seem truly sorry for what she did. This wasn't the worst book I've ever read but not the best I've ever read, solid writing.

Joyce says

Perfectly delightful and elegantly written account of Israel's career move into forgery in order to support herself. It should be a fun movie, and for once, I am not recommending the audiobook version. Jane Curtin reads engagingly, but she mispronounces Noel Coward's first name as No-elle and it grates, dozens of times, over and over. Proper names should be correctly pronounced. It's not as if you can't look it up! Had it not been for that I likely would have given this 4 stars--lovely language, a sympathetic protagonist, and irresistible letters from literary greats. Well, at least they're the letters they might have written. A quick, upbeat read.

T Campbell says

Torn on this one. Israel's a really charming writer and her slow decline into forgery is understandable and artfully presented. I hope Melissa McCarthy does well with the material. But in these fraught times, I have trouble fully endorsing a story about a colorful liar. At least she gets busted by the FBI, unlike some.

Mazola1 says

In this brief memoir, Lee Israel, a New York Times best-selling author, recounts that time in her life when she fell on hard times and turned to a life of crime. A talented and witty writer, Israel first fabricated letters from talented and witty writers such as Dorothy Parker and Edna Ferber. From that, she progressed to stealing genuine letters from libraries and replacing them with forgeries made by her.

The story is entertaining, the false letters fascinating. Israel seems to have real talent for the very type of letters we all believe Parker and her like would have written -- mundane, day to day stuff mixed with outrageous and sarcastic observations. Her forgeries were pitch perfect. They sold for modest sums, often to well known autograph dealers, and later appreciated wildly in value. That she fooled reputable dealers, and that the price went up is a testament to Israel's twisted talent.

I will confess that the book made me a bit nostalgic for the days when people actually wrote real letters, and when witty people wrote witty letters. Hint: Don't miss the hilarious "quotes" from famous people about the book on the back cover.

Hanneke says

A hilarious account of Lee Israel's forgery of letters of celebrities. She produced some 300 of them. She especially liked to manufacture letters from Dorothy Parker and Noel Coward, some of which are printed in the book and are very funny. I thought it was remarkable that she declared, after her arrest, that she considered the forged letters the best writing she had ever done. She wrote some biographies before and later worked as a copyeditor. Thanks, Sketchbook, for recommending this memoir!

AMEERA says

3.5

Ivan says

There is an old adage: never shit where you eat. Lee Israel is a very naughty lady who committed a series of high crimes and misdemeanors within and against the literary community in which she herself worked and

lived. In this slim memoir she explains herself; and while she admits to wrong doing, this isn't quite an apologia.

Israel was an acclaimed biographer of Tallulah Bankhead and Dorothy Kilgallen who, having written a bad book about Estee Lauder, found herself down and out. So, she bit the hand that had stopped feeding her. She took to forging letters by Noel Coward, Louise Brooks, Lillian Hellman and Dorothy Parker. Ironically, these letters represented some of her best work. She sold her little fictions to collectors who often made grand sums reselling them. A few even appeared in published volumes. Eventually she got nabbed, her works exposed as fakes, and reputations soiled.

However, all is not lost, for our lady of the forgers has composed a cheeky memoir worthy of the admiration of Coward, Brooks and Parker. Israel is gifted with a lacerating and acerbic wit; her observations and self-deprecations are barbed treasures that inspire broad smirks or appreciation. This is a book for those of us who enjoy books about books and writers. There is a touch of Helene Hanff, a smattering of Elaine Stritch at Liberty and even a little of Miss Dottie Parker. Thirty years ago I stopped for a pastry in the lobby of a hotel in Brussels, a little lemon Danish I've always remembered; *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* Is its literary equivalent, tart and not soon to be forgotten.

Jessica Woodbury says

You have probably only heard of this book because of the movie based on it, which is in theaters now. And you may be wondering if you should read the book first and I am happy to answer that question for you. This is one of those rare situations where the movie is a strong adaptation and you probably do not need to read the book first. In fact, I think seeing the movie first is just fine.

There will certainly be those who have already seen the movie and now wonder if they should read the book. Here is what you need to know. The movie is quite faithful, but what Israel the writer spends maybe two pages on the movie will spend a half hour on because Israel tends to skip over the actual action. If what really got you in the film is the relationship between Lee and Jack, that is the one place where the film takes some liberties, while Jack is a real person and we learn more about him in the book, their relationship is far from the center of the story, more of a footnote.

It is a sad movie and it is also a sad book but the book is less sad because the book is really Israel finally getting to tell everyone, "Look how marvelous these letters were, they really were my best writing."

Israel doesn't gloss over her faults and flaws, though she relegates them to a sentence or paragraph where the movie lets them actually sit with you. She isn't writing this book as a vanity project of any kind. But she will devote as much space to how she composed letters from Dorothy Parker as she does to a rather complex criminal scheme. She doesn't get into frame of mind, she doesn't talk about feeling guilty or worried all that much. She just takes us through it beat by beat... except for when she's talking about writing the letters themselves. And clearly this is, in her mind, the apex of her writing career. And, honestly, she's very good at it.

It's a slim, quick read and I quite liked Israel even if I found much of what she did horrifying. She's a real character, a truly unusual person, and quite a brave one. The people she spends the most time on are Louise Brooks, Noel Coward, Lillian Hellman, and Dorothy Parker. If you are a person who enjoys those writers, who enjoys dry wit, and who enjoys deep pettiness, you will likely enjoy this book quite a lot.

Sketchbook says

A screwball confessional that would delight Preston Sturges: Lee Israel, an adroit scribe of celeb bios, finds herself financially low - like all writers unless they inherit or marry money - and engages in some Restoration mischief that will offend the righteous and self-righteous. From her tiny one-room NYC flat, she forged innocuous celeb "letters" & signatures -- Ferber, Hellman, Parker, Noel Coward. "I was imprudent with money," she explains, and "I fell in love with a beautiful bartender named Elaine--."

Her double-distilled cynicism is hilariously extravagant. Lillian Hellman wrote lies, why not concoct a few more ? Coward, a showman, hugged the spotlight. "Dear Boy," writes Lee as Coward, "Marlene's opening was divine. The silly old kraut remains the most attractive woman on the face of the earth," and so on. Most memoirs and autobios are clogged w fake recollections. You really think anyone can recall a conversation fr 25 years ago?

Lee played the forgery game with perversity and discretion. Her mimicking was a fraudulent act, but has a satiric edge that's hard to beat.

fleegan says

This is a short (really short) autobiographical work by Lee Israel telling about the time period where she was in such dire straits that she resorted to forging letters of literary greats like Dorothy Parker, Lillian Hellman, and Noël Coward. Apparently she was pretty good at it.

She's a good storyteller and a talented writer so it seemed weird that she'd have to result to theft and forgery to make money. She does admit that pride did keep her from taking "real" jobs.

While this book was entertaining and well-written, I can't help but come away with a bad taste in my mouth about the whole thing. I mean, she admits to all of this crime after she got caught by the F.B.I., she didn't have to serve any jail time (only 6 months house arrest and 5 years probation), and to top it all off, she doesn't seem to be that sorry about it. She mostly seems sorry that she got caught and that she's now banned from the libraries she stole from.

So on the one hand it's a really interesting and entertaining book, on the other hand, I don't think she's really asking for forgiveness as much as she's trying to make more money.

Ammar says

This short one setting kind of non fiction is the basis of the new movie called Can You Ever Forgive Me ? By Lee Israel who is a forger of famous letters.

She started by copying letters in the style of some of the celebrities like Noel Coward and Dorothy Parker, and then improved by copying exact letters on similar paper and using similar typewriters and then replacing

the forged one for the original and selling the original to dealers in New York and other states.

I wish the book had more details
More flesh to it
To be more deep

And really who knows if any of what's in the book is real ... I wonder
