

Author of fraud book now derides movie version as 'fantasy'

by Norma Meyer

The real-life infamous hoaxer isn't happy with Hollywood. Clifford Irving, the Howard Hughes autobiography faker portrayed by Richard Gere in "The Hoax," says the movie is a joke.

And, the 76-year-old novelist complains his on-screen character comes off as a desperate "crackpot" made to resemble him with a prosthetic nose.

Clifford Irving "I heard it melted once in the hot sun and they had to delay shooting while they got another one made," Irving mused about Gere's putted schnoz. "Isn't it strange they worked so hard to get an actor to look like me when they don't have him play me?"

Time magazine's 1972 "Con Man of the Year" was speaking from his winter home in Aspen, Colo., where he says he does pilates, takes long walks with fifth wife Julie, paints as a hobby and "I literally hug trees" while exercising. The couple also live part time in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, next door to Irving's yoga instructor. A prolific writer, the father of three grown sons is working on a novel about the early years of French Impressionist Claude Monet.

The new movie is based on Irving's nonfiction memoirs, "The Hoax," which he wrote in 1972 shortly before doing 17 months in federal prison for perpetrating one of the 20th century's biggest literary scams. The page-turner details how he finagled a then-hefty \$750,000 book deal and penned a colorful but bogus Hughes biography in 1971, never expecting the eccentric billionaire to come forward to call it a lie after more than a decade in seclusion.

Irving had forged letters he claimed were written by Hughes to fool experienced publishers at McGraw-Hill and Life, as well as handwriting experts, into believing he had cloak-and-dagger rendezvous with his legendary subject at far-off sites, including a Mexican pyramid.

"You can't compare them," he said of the film, with its comedic tone, and real-life events. "They're two different stories."

Irving sold his book and life rights to the movie's producers years ago, then asked that his name be removed from the credits as its technical adviser soon after reading the script. He said he was upset with the movie's "fantasy," including a scene where his collaborator and researcher, Richard Suskind (played by a "buffoonish" Alfred Molina), sleeps with a hooker. Even the filmmakers admit the now-dead Suskind was a faithful husband.

The big-screen "Hoax" also portrays Irving as a down-on-his-luck writer struggling to make ends meet and residing in upstate New York with his then-wife, Edith. In fact, Irving had a four-book publishing deal with McGraw-Hill at the time he pitched the Hughes autobiography. And he points out not only did he, Edith and their two young sons live in a 15-room farmhouse on the Spanish island of Ibiza, he also had a sailboat and drove a Mercedes.

"If I was the guy portrayed in the movie, I'd shoot myself," Irving said. "I thought the character Richard Gere played in the movie was a crackpot. He was nuts. So desperate."

CREATIVE LICENSE

You'd think Irving would be the first person to understand creative license, which the filmmakers freely admit using.

Irving says years ago he spent hours talking with producer Josh Maurer and briefly met with screenwriter William Wheeler.

"They wanted to know what cigarettes I smoked and what kind of luggage I carried - every detail," Irving recalls.

The movie's costume designers also replicated Irving's suits and ties based on historical photos.

After all that research, the filmmakers concocted the opening scene - although Irving says he thought it was dramatically very good - in which his character and McGraw-Hill employees wait on a rooftop for a helicopter, supposedly carrying Hughes, to land. The helicopter turns away at the last second, but it's really a ruse devised by Irving and Suskind.

Irving says he never told anyone from the film he had pulled off or even thought about a helicopter ploy.

"That was a story he told us in detail," Wheeler countered. "Then he recanted it. Then I think he said, 'That was a plan I had in my back pocket.'"

Wheeler says the "very seductive" Irving seemed to recast his own version of events as he spoke with him.

"He was very warm, he was very hospitable, but he was also unreadable," Wheeler recently told a theater full of screenwriters in Los Angeles.

That audience laughed out loud during some of the movie's sequences - including a fictional one in which Irving and Suskind steal a manuscript from the home of former Hughes aide Noah Dietrich while the elderly man swims in his pool. (In reality, a copy of Dietrich's memoirs was given to Irving by an acquaintance.)

Unlike the book, the movie also hypes up a Watergate connection. According to former members of President Nixon's administration and FBI files, Nixon was leaked a copy of Irving's unpublished manuscript before June 1972 and became concerned over passages in which Hughes disclosed giving illegal loans to Nixon's brother. That reportedly added to Nixon's paranoia, prompting him to order the burglary of Democratic Party headquarters.

Suskind did jail time for the hoax, as did Irving's wife, Edith, who deposited checks made out to Hughes in a Swiss bank account. Edith still lives on Ibiza, Irving says, and recently sat upon a throne, built for her, at her 70th birthday party. He claims she watched a 10-minute clip of the movie (she's played by Marcia Gay Harden) and commented, "It was so unreal and so untrue all you could do was laugh."

Irving's former mistress, the Danish baroness Nina Van Pallandt (played by Julie Delpy), resides on the other side of Ibiza. He says he hasn't spoken to her for about six years, but heard she wasn't pleased about the film. Van Pallandt was an "elegant" woman portrayed on-screen "as a cut above a hooker," he said.

Neither "The Hoax" tome nor movie fully answers why Irving did it.

"The fact is, I don't know why," Irving said some 36 years later. "We lived in that kind of world. The island of Ibiza was a hippie outpost in the Mediterranean. Anything went. There were no rules. Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. We saw it as a prank, an adventure, a challenge.

"Sometimes I think, 'Jesus, how did we have the chutzpah to do this?'" Then he relates the "fun" he and Suskind had when they sat at a tape recorder, pretending to be Hughes and fabricating stories based on diligent research and wild imaginations. "We were like masterminds," he boasted.

No contriteness here. "How can you regret something you've done so long ago?" he asked.

After prison, Irving went on to write a number of successful books, but publishing houses wouldn't touch his most famous manuscript, "Autobiography of Howard Hughes."

In 1999, the book was offered on the Internet. It's available again at the writer's Web site, www.cliffordirving.com. The curious can read a few chapters for free. But if you download the entire book, the hoaxer who gained worldwide notoriety for his literary gall asks on his Web site that you send a check for \$5.95 to his New York agent or "put \$5 cash in an envelope and mail it to me" at a P.O. box in Aspen.

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