



# green tea *and* conversation

WITH CLINT EASTWOOD

BY TERENCE MCHALE

In preparation for meeting with Clint Eastwood, California Conversations once again tapped our spare change box and rented tapes and DVD's of everything Eastwood. The selection goes back almost fifty years. It was interesting to see interviews on one of the tapes from a few years ago with his mother, then in her late eighties or early nineties, and his sister a year younger than him. Both of them were appealing, lively, white-haired, pretty, well-dressed, and instantly likeable. They seemed to be in on a good joke. They spoke well of Clint, not adoring or overly impressed, just proud and you got the sense that the Eastwoods, no matter what Clint did for a living, were bound to make the best of things.

Clint Eastwood doesn't disappoint. California Conversations met with Eastwood in a deserted corner of the upstairs coffee shop at a Sacramento hotel. He is just as tall in person as you expect him to be on screen, and all of the adjectives used by movie reviewers apply – he is laconic and lanky and good looking. He was wearing a polo shirt and khaki slacks without a belt. His short

hair was unruly. He looks more like the disc jockey from “Play Misty for Me” would have aged than the barren William Munny from “Unforgiven,” or the pained boxing manager of “Million Dollar Baby.”

It is, of course, ridiculous to describe him. Eastwood is one of the most recognizable men in the world. In person he is gracious. In short order he is more impressive than intimidating. His responses are measured, spoken in a quiet voice that seems to start bigger in the far back of his throat and emerge in a hoarse whisper. He is matter-of-fact without a hint of arrogance.

Eastwood consciously began eating right and exercising decades ago. He said he works out one hour a day. Looking at him now his lifestyle is a worthwhile lesson. He ordered a green tea when he sat down.

We started from the beginning. At eleven and a half pounds Clint Eastwood was the biggest baby born at St. Mary's Hospital in San Francisco on May 31, 1930.

**California Conversations: Where did you grow up?**

**Clint Eastwood:** It was during the Depression, and we moved around California quite a bit.

**CC: Is the California you grew up in still recognizable?**

**CE:** I don't know...probably not, no. It seemed life was much simpler then, and I guess it was. There seemed to be less contention than there is today.

**CC: Would your dad have been surprised by the life you've lived?**

**CE:** No, I don't think so. I mean he lived long enough to see me have a regular job in the acting profession on "Rawhide," so that was good. I always felt that underneath it all he would have liked to have done the kind of work I do because he was much more extroverted than I am.

**CC: He was a steelworker by profession?**

**CE:** He did a lot of things. He was also sort of an amateur singer and he had a small band and they would play parties and things like that.

**CC: Were you close to your mother?**

**CE:** Yeah, sure. My mother used to say I had an angel on my shoulder.

**CC: Music important in your house?**

**CE:** I remember music being important. My dad played... my Mom, I remember her bringing home jazz albums.

**CC: Lifelong love of jazz?**

**CE:** Yeah...I played piano as a kid...(laughs)...girls liked it and I always liked the independence of jazz musicians. They played what they liked. I don't think they were too concerned with selling anything.

**CC: Was there a thought about being a musician for a living?**

**CE:** I don't know...I did a lot of things. In those days if you wanted anything you had to work for it. I was open to different things...I had a long adolescence. *(Eastwood has written the music for many of his movies, and his film "Bird" is the story of jazz legend Charlie Parker.)*

**CC: You were a CDF firefighter for awhile.**

**CE:** I was a seasonal firefighter for CDF in Oroville and then in Paradise.

**CC: Do you ever regret giving up CDF to go to Hollywood?**

**CE:** No. *(laughs)* I don't regret anything. CDF is a respect-

able job, though, and I have the greatest respect for those guys.

**CC: You were drafted?**

**CE:** Yeah, I was drafted into the army. I think it was 1951.

**CC: I was told you were in a plane that went down during the Korean War.**

**CE:** It wasn't anything that dramatic. The Korean War was going on, but I was on a navy plane that crashed off Pt. Reyes while I was returning from leave. It crashed into the water...*(laughs)*...I got a call from a guy who said they'd located the plane and could retrieve it if I wanted to help finance the deal...I told him I didn't have fond memories of the plane.

**CC: That's when your mother said you had an angel on your shoulder?**

**CE:** Then, and other times.

**CC: Your mother was able to see you win your Academy Awards before she died?**

**CE:** Yes, she went with me in 1995 and then a couple years ago for "Million Dollar Baby." She went with me three times to the ceremonies, yeah.

*The pending investigation of the plane crash kept Eastwood from going to Korea. He spent the war years in Monterey doing duty as a swimming instructor. Several other young soldiers talked about making their living as actors and encouraged him to do the same. Eastwood moved to Los Angeles and attended Los Angeles City College. He worked odd jobs, studied, and had enough presence to eventually be signed to a \$75 a week contract with Universal.*

*He played small parts without distinction in a few films and then "they let me go." The story is that his Adam's apple was too big. He dug swimming pools. He'd been brought up understanding work. Mostly by accident, he was spotted at CBS and asked if he was an actor. Of course he was an actor. He was six feet four inches tall and at twenty-seven had a neatness to his personality, a mix of being blessed and humble, and at a time when westerns were on every channel every night, he ended up spending seven years playing Rowdy Yates on "Rawhide."*

**CC: In an old interview, someone asked what separated you from other actors of the '50s, why you were successful, and your response was "courtesy?"**

**CE:** It was courtesy? I don't know what the hell I was thinking of when I said that.



**CC:** *(laughs)* Did the way you treat others make a difference in your career?

**CE:** I don't know, I don't think so. I think it's just luck of the draw. I think you have to, like in every profession, you have to work harder at it to be successful. I think also you have to have some good breaks along the way. I mean when a good break comes your way, be able to take advantage of it. That's the big deal.

**CC:** Acting was always a goal?

**CE:** I got into acting for different reasons. It was something I thought about in school. It was there after I got out of the military and went to college in Los Angeles. I could have done other things, I guess.

**CC:** Since "Rawhide," was there ever a time when you were afraid you wouldn't be able to work in the movies?

**CE:** I don't think I was ever afraid, but an actor always goes through that period where you think every job is your last job. I haven't had that in recent years, because I guess I'm at the age now where you don't care so much if it's your last job. I remember in "Rawhide," I was very careful to save my dough because I figured when the show ended there'd be a long period before I'd work again. I knew so many people coming out of a series, they'd just kind of flounder.

**CC:** Did you ever make a movie you thought was a mistake?

**CE:** Probably a lot of them, but I would never admit it. Whatever they are in hindsight, they are, whether they're mistakes or whether they're good movies. I've probably made some bad movies, but I've also made some good ones, so it's just the nature of life. Nobody hits it over the fence every time they go to bat.

**CC:** You and Burt Reynolds, old-time friends?

**CE:** Yeah, I met him when he was doing a series called "Riverboat" and I was doing "Rawhide." There was a bunch of guys in a series in those times that hung around town.

**CC:** The movie you made with Reynolds is probably not one of your favorites.

**CE:** It was okay. It wasn't the strongest story in the world. It was kind of a fluff thing.

**CC:** In the book, "Conversations with Cary Grant," there's a discussion where they say a young actor named Clint Eastwood looked up to Cary Grant

and wanted to meet him. There was evidently a lunch, I don't know if you remember it, with Lucille Ball and Cary Grant and you.

**CE:** Well, of course Cary Grant was a huge star when I was growing up, so it was a great pleasure to meet him. I loved some of his pictures, "His Girl Friday," and even "Arsenic and Old Lace" and all those things. I thought he was great.

**CC:** Were you impressed with him?

**CE:** Yes, oh yeah, he was a terrific guy. I grew up watching Cary and James Cagney. I liked him a lot and I grew up in that generation where the female actors were Bette Davis and Joan Crawford and Ingrid Bergman.

**CC:** Of course, you directed William Holden.

**CE:** William Holden, yeah. "Sunset Boulevard" was one of my favorite Billy Wilder movies and then I got to direct him in my second or third film ("Breezy," his second, co-starring Kay Lenz). He was terrific. That was a great pleasure. I remember he used to complain when he first met me. He'd say, "Well you didn't say anything to me." I said, well I was overwhelmed. I couldn't think of anything to say to him.

**CC:** Was "Dirty Harry" the turning point in your career?

**CE:** No, I think going to Italy and doing the Leone pictures was probably the turning point. "Dirty Harry" was another turning point; there were a lot of little turning points along the way that broke me out of the western genre, that took me to the cop/adventure story/drama genre and then from there I started branching out. I was always pushing the envelope anyway, sometimes not so successfully, sometimes successfully.

**CC:** Is it true that Frank Sinatra was the first choice for "Dirty Harry?"

**CE:** Well, actually, I was the first choice. Warner Brothers had been taken over, and it was a new administration. They needed product and I said sure I'll do it, but you've got to wait six months because I'm directing my first film and I'm not giving up this opportunity. So, to make a long story short, they tried to get other people. They talked to Robert Mitchum and Steve McQueen. I guess those people flirted with it and then they said Sinatra was going to do it. Meanwhile, I did "Play Misty for Me," and then Sinatra dropped out of it for some reason. They called back and said are you still interested in doing it?

**CC: It would have been a different picture with Sinatra.**

**CE:** It would have been different. Don Siegel was directing and he would have made something good out of it.

*Malpaso is the name of Clint's production company. Eastwood has directed 27 films, the 17 or so films produced by his company have resulted in more than one billion dollars in gross receipts. A woman we spoke to at Warner's said she has worked on Eastwood projects for more than 25 years, even if they're not Warner's films, because he makes every person on the set feel important. He got the name Malpaso from a creek that runs in his beloved Carmel area of California, a place he got to know during the military. He said he always told himself as a young man that if he "saved any dough he'd buy land there."*

**CC: At what point did you realize you could go beyond being an actor to producing and directing?**

**CE:** I could always write. I was always interested in writing even before I became hireable or whatever you call it in the acting profession. I used to go around to different sets and watch the directors. I saw a lot of movie directors on the "Rawhide" set, a lot of them maybe on their way down, but they had a lot to offer.

**CC: Did becoming a director make you even more marketable as an actor?**

**CE:** I'm not sure. I don't think so, one way or the other. It just depends on the product, whatever you're making, and how it is received in public.

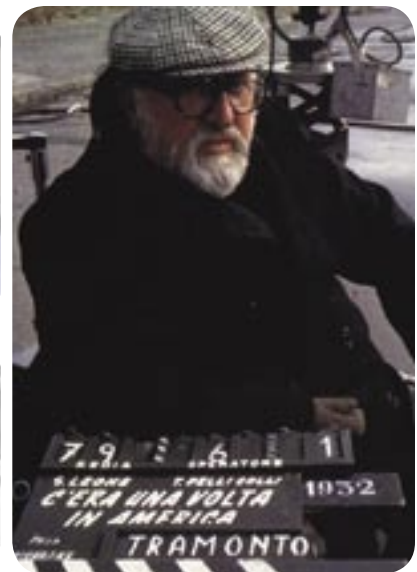
**CC: Directing an early goal?**

**CE:** I liked the process and, later on, working with Leone in Europe and then Don Siegel in this country, I became interested as soon as I got the opportunity. I would just as soon have directed only, but in order to get the job, I had to be in it. I was a young guy on the acting scene at the time.

*Sergio Leone and Don Siegel*

*Sergio Leone decided in the early '60s to make his 'Spaghetti Westerns.' He could not afford bigger stars like Henry Fonda or James Coburn and was convinced to hire a television actor from California. Eastwood made "A Fistful of Dollars" during a break from "Rawhide" and, beyond going to Europe for the first time, he discovered a director who sometimes worked under primitive conditions but controlled his own product.*

*There were three Leone westerns. We asked Clint if Eli Wallach ever said Clint was the ugly one in the "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly." He laughed and said he could have played all three. The Leone films made Eastwood one of the few actors to move from television stardom to movie superstardom. For a long time he was also branded—so much so that when John Wayne died an obituary mentioned Eastwood as one of the lesser western actors. Of course, it was an unfair reference to them both—Wayne has his own following, but to compare John Wayne to Clint Eastwood you would have to assume that John*



CLINT AS DIRTY HARRY (1971); INTERVIEWING CLINT; SERGIO LEONE; DON SIEGEL AND CLINT

Wayne eventually became the man who directed him so often, the four-time Academy Award winning director, John Ford.

Eastwood also became friends with a director a generation older than him, Don Siegel. The strong-minded Siegel was a disciplined film-maker who understood the importance of budgets and schedules. Siegel began his career as an editor and a second-unit director and moved on to B pictures, including one of the best science fiction pictures ever made, “Invasion of the Body Snatchers.” He directed a half-dozen films starring Clint Eastwood, including “The Beguiled,” a daring story that comes closest to Eastwood being a great screen lover, and “Dirty Harry.” Siegel was close enough to Eastwood to be a presence on the set of the first film Eastwood directed. The answer to a good trivia question is that Don Siegel played the bartender in the scene when Eastwood meets the femme fatale in “Play Misty for Me.”

In 1992, Eastwood won his first Academy Award for “Unforgiven.” He dedicated the movie to Siegel and Leone.

**CC: “Unforgiven”—you sat on that script for years?**

**CE:** Yeah, I bought it in 1981, I think. I put it in the drawer. I went all the way through the ’80s with it. I felt that someday it would be an important project to do, and I felt that age would not hurt it. But that was all unplanned, it was all by the seat of the pants flying and then all of a sudden in the early ’90s, I thought I better take that out and take a look at it. I reread it and said, yeah I’m going to do this.

**CC: Some reviewers said the movie is flawless. Is there anything you would have done differently?**

**CE:** No, not really. I don’t know if it’s flawless. I’m not the dealer, I’m just the maker. I did enjoy making it, and I had a terrific cast with Morgan and Gene. It was a great pleasure to do.

**CC: What would have happened if Will Munny met Rooster Cogburn?**

**CE:** Rooster would have been in real trouble. I don’t know. John Wayne, of course, was a tremendous star and he was a tremendous presence on film. I wouldn’t think of him as Rooster Cogburn, though. I would think of him in “Red River” or “The Searchers” or some of those roles he played in which he was really quite excellent.

**CC: Of course, in “Red River,” he got beat up by Montgomery Clift. That wouldn’t have happened to a Clint Eastwood character, would it?**

**CE:** It wouldn’t have happened to John Wayne in real life either. (laughs)



In the 1980s Pope John Paul was visiting California. A television news anchor covering the story paused and said it occurred to her that the three most eligible bachelors in the world were going to be in town that day; Clint Eastwood, wealthy legislator Rusty Areias, and the Pope.

Areias and Eastwood are good friends. They did not hang out much with the Pope. Rusty joined us in the restaurant after the recorder was turned off and he and Eastwood chatted amiably. Rusty tells a story about the man who moves slowly with a walker and never looks around, his eyes foggy and his spirit gone.

“He let the old man in,” Areias explained.

Eastwood talks about age. He doesn’t fool himself. He says he needs glasses and doesn’t move as quickly as he once did. He can count.

However, his work product speaks for itself. He is still hitting his stride with a recent string of movies that are as impressive as any in the American catalogue. His awards and grosses are a matter of record.

He and Areias laugh easily. There is the impression that Eastwood likes his life very much – the old man is not getting in.



CLINT EASTWOOD, ACTOR AND DIRECTOR (PHOTOS COURTESY OF WARNER BROTHERS)

*In 1986, Eastwood the actor becomes Eastwood the California politician.*

**CC: At what point did you go from being a Hollywood figure to becoming a public policy personality?**

**CE:** I lived in Carmel for many years and local politics started getting mired down. It seemed like there was a rather primitive atmosphere among the politicians. People are in office a long time, and they start thinking they belong there under any circumstances and there seemed to be a lot of dissatisfaction in the community. I said let me help somebody that wants to run. Then we were having a couple glasses of wine and this one guy, Bud Allen, says, "Clint, why don't you run for mayor? You'll bust this town wide open." Well, I didn't want to bust the town wide open I just wanted to get in, do the best job I could and then move on.

**CC: Did you work in films during this period?**

**CE:** Actually over the two years I did "Bird" and "Heartbreak Ridge." I went off to do movies, but I'd come back and make the meetings.

**CC: Do you think Arnold Schwarzenegger has changed our view of politicians?**

**CE:** Certainly. I think the great thing about democracy is that anybody can run for office if they can muster up the enthusiasm. When I became mayor of Carmel everybody was speculating I was going to run for the Senate, but I really had no intention. Bob Dole came to visit me and said are you interested in running for any other office? I said I'm just interested right here in this community.

**CC: You never considered higher office at all?**

**CE:** No.

**CC: You've been active on the State Parks Commission.**

**CE:** Rusty Areias talked me into that when he was Director of Parks. I've been grateful ever since.

**CC: Is open land at risk in California?**

**CE:** I think Proposition 84 passing will help because our parks will get some assistance. Of course, the population growth impacts our parks, but I think open space remains an important priority and there is a strong advocacy for protection. I think what government should be doing simultaneously with managing open space is to be encouraging, probably through tax incentives and land swaps, private property owners to maintain open space.

**CC: What's the future with Pebble Beach?**

**CE:** Pebble Beach is a terrific organization. It's another example of a private corporation maintaining stewardship of the land. What we've done at Pebble Beach, I've been able to do in a mini-way at Mission Ranch in the same area. I bought that out of development. I maybe expanded four units to make it economically viable. Hopefully that place will look to visitors fifty years from now much as it does now.

**CC: Do you get frustrated when people come in with different plans to develop the Monterey area?**

**CE:** I don't know how frustrated I am. Some of them are innovative ideas and some of them are not so innovative. When I grew up, we didn't have environmentalists, we had conservationists. That's the way it was in

the Depression Era. You were taught to turn off the water to save water, save electricity, save everything. Everybody was frugal at that time, much of it from a practical standpoint of cost, but also it was a mindset. Of course, we're in a much different generation now. We're spoiled because we live in better times. I remember talking with Rusty when he first appointed me to Parks, and I said my interest is not necessarily acquiring park property, but maintaining what we've got.

**CC: The Coastal Commission followed you to Monterey and it hasn't always been smooth.**

**CE:** No. We're trying to get the Pebble Beach Plan, which was approved by the voters in Measure A, to be instituted and it's mired in the politics.

**CC: Does the Coastal Commission consider you a developer?**

**CE:** *(long pause)* If I were a developer I could have been out a lot of years ago building tracts. I took a property on Malpas Creek and managed with the Big Sur Land Trust to get that into open space. I've donated land to Big Sur Land Trust. I'm trying to endow a river which has been traumatized by the need for water, and I've preserved Mission Ranch and donated land to Pacific Meadows. I've dealt with affordable housing projects and the changes in demographics. You know, I was trying to do things that seem like they're practical at the time. I bought the property 35-40 years ago, and we could have developed the land and made a lot of money off of it. It's not a question of making money. There's a reason I made this area my home. I want people to come back many years from now and it will still look and feel the same.

*Eastwood won the Golden Globe in January for "Letters from Iwo Jima" and has been nominated again for an Academy Award (he is one of a handful of directors who has won the award twice). He was also given a Maria Shriver inspired award for being one of the great Californians inducted into a state hall of fame.*

**CC: Letters is getting great notices. Doing the two films together, "Flags of Our Fathers" and "Letters from Iwo Jima" took how long?**

**CE:** Well, "Flags of Our Fathers" I started in August before this last one, and then I did "Letters" afterward. "Letters" was a smaller film, and I did that on Iwo Jima and in an old silver mine in California, and on some state property in Malibu. Then we went to Iwo for the big beaches because they had the huge black sand beaches, which is rather unique.

**CC: People look at them as bookend films?**

**CE:** They're completely separate, but together I think they amount to a nice statement about war and mankind's inability to progress beyond it.

**CC: Did the sacrifices of that generation make us a more compassionate people?**

**CE:** Absolutely. I think without their sacrifices we may be speaking another language now. What it all boils down to is asking young kids not out of their teens yet to possibly pay the ultimate sacrifice.

**CC: Do you still get excited about awards?**

**CE:** It's nice if it comes along. I would just rather make my statement in the films and what goes beyond that I have no control over it anyway.

**CC: But, is it still exciting?**

**CE:** I suppose it would be at the time, but right now I don't like to think about that sort of thing. I just like to think about the film, if audiences appreciate it, that's terrific. The main thing is we live in an era now where films are mostly geared towards teenagers. When I grew up, whole families went to films together. But now it's tough to get younger people interested in biographical films or historical films because everything is built around Play Stations and games. It's the "can you top this" sort of thing. I guess I'm old fashioned. I still love films where the story is the king and, after the casting, then the execution.

**CC: The two great California actor/directors of your generation are you and Robert Redford. Did you and Redford ever consider working on a project?**

**CE:** I've known Bob over the years socially on occasion. I don't know him really well, but he's had a very nice career. We've never had the occasion to work together, no. I'd like to, he's a very good actor.

**CC: What actors or actresses would you like to work with in the future?**

**CE:** Well, most of them are all deceased. *(laughs)* I guess I think of everything in terms of the property. If I read a script and I saw Kate Winslet while reading it, I would think that would be the person I would love to have for it. If you cast a movie well, and I'm not the first guy to ever say that, then you're 90% there. If you have a good story, but you miscast it, you put yourself in an uphill battle.

**CC: How far ahead do you plan your next project?**

**CE:** Not too far ahead. The last four pictures just came along. “Mystic River,” I read it and I fell in love with it, and four weeks later I owned it and we had a script and we’re making it. I thought I would take a rest after that and then “Million Dollar Baby” came along. I liked the script, so I said okay I’ll do that. Then Steven Spielberg asked me if I wanted to come over and direct “Flags of Our Fathers.” I liked that book a lot, so I said sure. Then while preparing that, I got the idea for “Letters.”

**CC: Do you think in terms of legacy?**

**CE:** No, not really. I think in terms of now. I think in terms of the future as far as certain elements, but I’m not thinking of personal legacy.

**CC: Do you think of how much time you have left?**

**CE:** No, not really. I’m in reasonably good shape. I just think there’s a lot to do.

*In one of the famous moments on 60 Minutes, correspondent Steve Kroft asked Eastwood about his adventurous love life. Eastwood responded with what can only be charitably described as a cold glare.*

**CC: Were you genuinely angry at Steve Kroft on 60 Minutes?**

**CE:** No, I maybe didn’t want to answer some of the questions he was asking, personal stuff, but no, Steve’s a good guy.

**CC: How difficult is it for you to protect your private life?**

**CE:** Well, it’s the nature of the profession that you can’t protect it to some degree, but I’ve managed as well as the next person, I guess. I have no complaints. You give up something to do this work. I always find it interesting when people get annoyed with somebody asking them to sign a little paper. I mean, you have to take certain things with everything you do.

**CC: Do you go anywhere where you’re not recognized?**

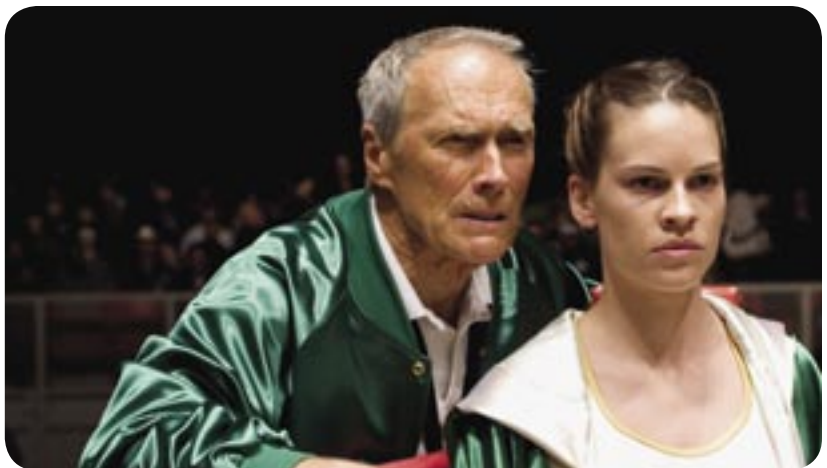
**CE:** You know, there’s not too many places in the world now. I’ve been on the north coast of Greenland and the southern coast of Africa, and there’s always somebody...sometimes that’s a disadvantage because I’m not the kind of person that loves to handshake the public at every turn...I’ve led a great life. I have no complaints. This part of my life has been extremely satisfying on a family level and career-wise.

**CC: We asked Governor Wilson if when he was governor, did anybody walk into his office and say Pete, you’re full of shit. Does anybody ever do that to Clint Eastwood?**

**CE:** Not in those words. *(laughs)* Maybe they didn’t say it exactly that way, but maybe they did. I don’t know. I’d say that’s your opinion, you’re welcome to it. There’s no more decision-making job than directing a film because you’re making hundreds of decisions all day, and you’ve got to live by them. If you make enough right ones, the project comes out okay. If you make too many wrong ones, then it goes into mediocrity.

**CC: Thank you for taking the time to visit.**

**CE:** I enjoyed it.



EVERY WHICH WAY BUT LOOSE (1978) ; MILLION DOLLAR BABY (2004)