



## Celebrities

# Eighty-one Years. Seventy-nine Movies. Two Oscars. Not One Bad Performance.

Whether it's *The French Connection* or *Hoosiers* or *Unforgiven*, or, hell, you name it, **Gene Hackman** has delivered some of the grittiest and most memorable performances of the past fifty years. But is he really and truly finished with movies? In a rare interview, the legend talks about acting, his late-blooming career as an author, and what he despises most in other men

BY MICHAEL HAINEY

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He  
has  
the

reputation, for better or worse, of being "an everyman." Whatever that means.

He may be, more precisely, an enigma-man. A silent man who speaks through his characters. He's a curious mix. On one hand, he has the gravitas of the Lincoln Memorial. On the other hand, he has the physical forgettability of that middle-management guy in the seat next to you on the flight from Rochester to Omaha.

He grew up in Danville, Illinois. His father, Eugene Hackman, was a pressman for the local newspaper. His mother was a waitress. When Hackman was 13, his father abandoned the family. Hackman was out in the street, playing. His father passed him by, just giving a wave of his hand.

"I hadn't realized how much one small gesture can mean," he once said, looking back on it. "Maybe that's why I became an actor."

At 16, Hackman bluffed his way into the Marines. When he came out, at 19, he wound up in California and

took classes at the Pasadena Playhouse, where he met another struggling nobody named Dusty Hoffman. Classmates voted both of them "least likely to succeed." They decided to go to New York, where they had another acting buddy they could run with: Robert Duvall. Picture the three of them roaming the city, hustling for parts all day, hitting the bars at night. (Will someone please make *that* movie?)

Hackman's mother died in 1962, before he hit it big. He rarely speaks about her death, but it has been reported that she was drinking, then passed out in bed with a lit cigarette, starting a fire that killed her.

His big break came in 1967 with *Bonnie and Clyde*. Oddly enough, he got the role of Buck Barrow after he'd been thrown off *The Graduate*, for which (at age 36) he had been cast to play Dustin Hoffman's potential father-in-law, Mr. Robinson. (Hoffman was 29.) Warren Beatty snatched him up, and Hackman went on to get an Oscar nomination for his portrayal of Barrow. From then, he was off and running on a career that includes *The French Connection* (for which he won his first Oscar), *The Conversation*, *Reds*, *Hoosiers*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Unforgiven* (for which he won his second Oscar), and *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

And then there's *Welcome to Mooseport*, the movie that will be his last movie—unless Hackman changes his mind.

For now, he says he's retired, splitting his time between painting and writing.



**GQ: You've got to do one more movie.**

**Hackman:** I don't know. If I could do it in my own house, maybe, without them disturbing anything and just one or two people.

**GQ: There are so many guys who want to see you back in the movies.**

**Hackman:** Well, that's very kind.

**GQ: You have to do it. Your hero James Cagney was retired forever and then came back to do Ragtime. Can't you do one more?**

**Hackman:** [laughs] Well...

**GQ: Why do you love Cagney so much?**

**Hackman:** There was a kind of energy about him, and he was totally different from anyone I'd ever seen in my life. Having been brought up in the Midwest, I didn't know those New York people. I thought he was terrific. Everything he did had a life to it. He was a bad guy in most of the films, and yet there was something lovable about him and creative.

**GQ: You have this reputation of the brawler. Are you still an angry young man?**

**Hackman:** Probably. I hate that idea, because it's the antithesis of the creative spirit and what it takes to be a creative person. But you do, sometimes, what happens in the spur of the moment. I, unfortunately, kind of react.

**GQ: When's the last time you threw a punch?**

**Hackman:** A real punch? I suppose it's been ten years.

**GQ: Was it at a wall or at a person?**

**Hackman:** A person. It was silly. It was that traffic thing. [In 2001, when he was 71, Hackman had a fender bender in Hollywood. He got out to inspect the damage to his car, and next thing you know, he takes a swing at the guy and has him on the pavement.]

**GQ: Is it true that when you were a boy, your mother took you to see movies and she told you that she wanted "to see you do that someday"?**

**Hackman:** She did say that. I would have been 10. Things parents say to children are oftentimes not heard, but in some cases you pick up on things that your parent would like to see you have done. Unfortunately my mom never saw me act, so I'm sorry for that, but that's the way it is.

**GQ: If you could show her just one of your movies, what would you show her?**

**Hackman:** *I Never Sang for My Father*. I thought it was a sensitive picture about family and relationships, and I think she would have been proud and happy to see that. You're fortunate sometimes to be able to do something in life that defines who you are and who your parents may have wanted you to be.

**GQ: Your new historical novel, *Payback at Morning Peak*, opens with a boy who loses his father. And you have a scene in which he sees what you describe as "the sad bundle" that is his dead mother.**

**Hackman:** Yeah, they tell you not to write about your mom in books, but I don't know how you keep from doing that.

**GQ: You have the father telling the boy, "Be the man I taught you to be." Are there any things that your father taught you?**

**Hackman:** I had a troubled youth. *[laughs]* Any lines, or any comfort, direction, or things of that nature, would've come from my mother. She and my grandmother were important.

**GQ: Were you closer to your mom or to your grandmother?**

**Hackman:** My grandmother was somewhat infirm when I was 10 or 12, and we all lived in the same house, so when my mother and father were out hanging wallpaper, or whatever they were doing as an extra job, my grandmother and I babysat each other. I was too young to be left alone, and she was too old to be left alone, so I became very close with her. She was a great storyteller.

**GQ: Is there a character from literature that you wish you could play?**

**Hackman:** Robert Jordan *[For Whom the Bell Tolls]*. I like Edmond Dantès in *The Count of Monte Cristo*—having been able to keep that terrible vengeance in his soul for so many years and then carrying out what he thought were justified events in the end. I like that as a novel. As a human being, that's not the healthiest thing.

**GQ: Strange question, but—ever have a fort as a kid?**

**Hackman:** I was terrified of the basement. I forced myself to go there and make a place where I felt safe. Of course, that was the spot where my dad took me to dole out the punishment if I'd been rude to him. There was a variety of junk, and I made myself a haven. Silly... But it was my space.

**GQ: Back in the '70s you said, "I have misgivings about not doing more with my life. It's all congealed gravy. I wish I'd gone into something else." Do you still feel that way?**

**Hackman:** I don't think so. You go through stages in your career that you feel very good about yourself. Then you feel awful, like, Why didn't I choose something else? But overall I'm pretty satisfied that I made the right choice when I decided to be an actor. I was lucky to find a few things that I could do well as an actor and that I could look at and say, "Yeah, that's all right."

**GQ: You worked with Coppola on *The Conversation*. He's a director who has a "reputation." Tell me about that movie.**

**Hackman:** He wanted Brando for that part. But it's not too bad to be second to Brando. *[laughs]* We rehearsed—normally you don't get a lot of rehearsal in films. We took advantage of Francis having some juice, because he'd just finished *The Godfather*. It was a good experience, because he's such a confident filmmaker. It was great because it was about something. It was about paranoia, the whole idea of eavesdropping. He's a very hands-on director, but after rehearsal he left me alone. But you knew what was required of you. Most directors, if sensitive at all and think an actor knows what he's doing in a film, have the good sense to leave him alone, and he did that.

**GQ: If someone were to portray you, what would be the key to "getting" you?**

**Hackman:** That's a tough one. Almost anything one would say would sound egotistical. *[pauses]* I'd like to think that if an actor was playing me, that he would do me in an honest fashion. I always try to approach the work in that way, regardless of how good or bad the script. When I say "honest," I say to portray what is on the page, instead of what maybe people might think of me or what I would like them to think of me in terms of personality or charisma. But just be what is asked of me on the page.

**GQ: You mean that you're an artist who is very faithful to the text.**

**Hackman:** Well, that's where the clue is to any creative process, to be able to figure out what is already there. Not to try to embellish.

**GQ: Yet you always find the details in the character. You once said that you try to find the things that aren't written there.**

**Hackman:** Yes, but what's there comes first.

**GQ: In *The French Connection* there is that scene where you're outside the nightclub eating that cruller, and this girl dusts you. And there's this way you take a chomp out of the cruller, then flick it over your shoulder. I can't imagine it was in the script.**

**Hackman:** We filmed that fairly early on. That was one of the clues to the character to me. That piece of behavior helped me with the rest of the film.

**GQ: What's a quality in a man that you despise?**

**Hackman:** Intimidation. Anybody who intimidates me, regardless of how they do it.

**GQ: Dustin Hoffman says you would often go out into the night in New York and get into a bar fight.**

**Hackman:** Dusty has a way of embellishing. His dad came to visit, and Dusty wanted me to meet him, and later Dusty said, "After you left, my dad said to me, 'Who's that guy? A truck driver?'" *[laughs]* Actually I was driving a truck at the time, a moving van.

**GQ: This is when you were living in New York and working as a moving man?**

**Hackman:** Yeah, so he nailed me pretty good on that. I never really went out looking for trouble with people. If you go out enough at night...

**GQ: ...Trouble will find you.**

**Hackman:** Exactly. You *will* have some history.

**GQ: Is there advice you give your son?**

**Hackman:** Advice to my son. *[pauses]* I lost touch with my son in terms of advice early on. Maybe it had to do with being gone so much, doing location films when he was at an age where he needed support and guidance. It was very tough for me to be gone for three months and then come home and start bossing him around.

**GQ: How do you want to be remembered?**

**Hackman:** As a decent actor. As someone who tried to portray what was given to them in an honest fashion. I don't know, beyond that. I don't think about that often, to be honest. I'm at an age where I should think about it. *[laughs]*

**GQ: Let's do word association. Reds.**

**Hackman:** Difficult.

**GQ: Bonnie and Clyde.**

**Hackman:** Great fun.

**GQ: Hoosiers.**

**Hackman:** Passed me by.

**GQ: How do you mean?**

**Hackman:** I took the film at a time that I was desperate for money. I took it for all the wrong reasons, and it turned out to be one of those films that stick around. I was from that area of the country and knew of that event, strangely enough. We filmed fifty miles from where I was brought up. So it was a bizarre feeling. I never expected the film to have the kind of legs it's had.

**GQ: Where do you keep your Oscars?**

**Hackman:** You know, I'm not sure; I don't have any memorabilia around the house. There isn't any movie stuff except a poster downstairs next to the pool table of Errol Flynn from *Dawn Patrol*. I'm not a sentimental guy.

**GQ: So you just move through life and shed?**

**Hackman:** Yeah. It all just kind of peels off....

**GQ: Sum up your life in a phrase.**

**Hackman:** "He tried." I think that'd be fairly accurate.

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