

*Pay it Forward* (2000)

Reviewed by [D. H. Drei](#) in the [December 13, 2000](#) issue

For anyone with an ounce of idealism, or any fond memories of singing "Pass It On," *Pay It Forward*

offers some morally powerful moments, at least at the beginning. It opens with a facially scarred teacher, Gene Simonet, directing his students to come up with a plan to change the world. Simonet, as played by Kevin Spacey, exudes some unusually dangerous vibrations in the seventh-grade classroom. What he's seen of the world has given him a cold intensity: he doesn't really expect his students to shake off their adolescent lethargy, but he's got no energy for coddling them either.

Fresh-faced Trevor McKinney (Haley Joel Osment of *The Sixth Sense*) takes him up on the challenge. Trevor proposes a chain letter of good deeds. He'll do a good deed for three people (it has to be something important and something hard, he says) and then instruct each recipient that the way to pay him back is to "pay it forward"--to do good deeds for three other people, who are instructed to pay it forward, and so on. Trevor's classmates seem stunned by this vision of advancing altruism, or perhaps by the fact that Trevor doesn't just blow off the assignment.

There's

a nice edge to the fact that an outbreak of compassion is regarded as socially outrageous. When Trevor puts his idea into practice by inviting a homeless man to sleep in his garage, his dissolute mother (Helen Hunt), a waitress in a Las Vegas strip joint, thinks he's crazy and heads off to school to scold Simonet. For a while, it looks like the movie will use the "pay it forward" idea to examine the disruptive power of compassion.

Hollywood tends to make children the repositories of virtue in a messed-up world, and in this case Trevor not only shows more wisdom than his parents (his abusive father, also an alcoholic, returns briefly) but more maturity than any adult in Las Vegas. A graver

problem is that the movie ends up focusing on a domestic situation. Trevor's idea of a good deed for Simonet and for his mother is to pair them up. That way, his lonely teacher will find the companionship he lacks, his alcoholic mom will get the solid man she needs, and Trevor will get the stable household he desires. Trevor as matchmaker is cute, but domestic cuteness is not what the movie should be aiming for.

Even

worse, the movie starts mythologizing the "pay it forward" scheme before examining concrete acts of compassion. It's as if "paying it forward" is really more interesting as a media event than as a moral project.