

## Product Placement

LAST SUMMER, JEFF SPEICHER, the Academy's former media relations manager, received a call from a Hollywood movie production designer. (Happens all the time.) "I'm working on a movie that stars Jack Nicholson as an actuary," the designer told him. "Do you have any actuarial stuff we could use to make the guy's office look more authentic?"

Wait a minute. Hold on. Jack Nicholson? As an actuary?

Well, why not? You got a problem with that?

So anyway, Jeff packed up a carton full of *Contingencies* and *Updates*, a wall poster, an Academy golf shirt, some public policy monographs, and anything else "actuarial" he could think of and shipped it all off to Omaha, Neb., which is where the movie was shooting.

Meanwhile, I tried to use the actuarial connection to finagle an interview with the star for *Contingencies*. ("So what's it like playing an actuary, Jack? Anything like playing an alcoholic psychopathic novelist?") But I was told the set was closed. No interview there.

So I resorted to some investigating on my own. The movie is called *About Schmidt*, based on a novel of that name by Louis Begley. The novel is about a nasty, anti-Semitic New York lawyer who, after being forced into retirement, tries to jump-start his stalled life with a Latino waitress who's a fraction of his age. He's also at odds with his only daughter because he can't stand the young Jewish law partner she wants to marry. It takes place mostly

in Manhattan and in the Hamptons on Long Island.

So where does the actuary part come in? Good question. For some reason, filmmaker Alexander Payne and his writing partner Jim Taylor (*Citizen Ruth*, *Election*) bought the rights to the book, then jettisoned just about everything but the title, the character's last name, and the father-daughter conflict. They transported the story from New York to the Midwest and West, named Schmidt Warren instead of Albert, lost the anti-Semitism and the Latino waitress, made the son-in-law a waterbed salesman instead of a lawyer, and turned Schmidt into . . . an actuary.

How did it all work out? The movie is scheduled to open some time around when this issue hits your mailbox, so I haven't actually seen it yet. But I have read the script and I've got to tell you, it's terrific. To say that *About Schmidt* is about actuaries is like saying *To Kill a Mockingbird* is about ornithology, but the story is lovely and the storytelling is masterful. I can't wait to see it.

And I won't even be terribly disappointed if *Contingencies* ends up on the cutting room floor. ●



EDITOR

# Contingencies

VOLUME 14/NUMBER 2

PUBLISHED BY THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ACTUARIES

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CONTINGENCIES (ISSN 1048-9851) IS PUBLISHED BIMONTHLY BY THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ACTUARIES, 1100 SEVENTEENTH STREET, NW, 7TH FLOOR, WASHINGTON, DC 20036. FOR SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION AND CUSTOMER SERVICE, CONTACT THE CONTINGENCIES SUBSCRIPTION DEPARTMENT AT THE ADDRESS ABOVE OR (202) 223-8196. ADVERTISING OFFICES: MOHANNA & ASSOCIATES, INC., (972) 596-8777, DAWNETTE@MOHANNA.COM. PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID AT WASHINGTON, DC, AND AT ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES. BPA CIRCULATION AUDITED. (BASIC ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION RATE IS INCLUDED IN DUES. NON-MEMBER RATE IS \$24.)

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