



What Happens Next: A History of American Screenwriting

Marc Norman

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Screenwriters have always been viewed as Hollywood's stepchildren. Silent-film comedy pioneer Mack Sennett forbade his screenwriters from writing anything down, for fear they'd get inflated ideas about themselves as creative artists. The great midcentury director John Ford was known to answer studio executives' complaints that he was behind schedule by tearing a handful of random pages from his script and tossing them over his shoulder. And Ken Russell was so contemptuous of Paddy Chayefsky's screenplay for *Altered States* that Chayefsky insisted on having his name removed from the credits.

Of course, popular impressions aside, screenwriters have been central to moviemaking since the first motion picture audiences got past the sheer novelty of seeing pictures that moved at all. Soon they wanted to know: What happens next? In this truly fresh perspective on the movies, veteran Oscar-winning screenwriter Marc Norman gives us the first comprehensive history of the men and women who have answered that question, from Anita Loos, the highest-paid screenwriter of her day, to Robert Towne, Quentin Tarantino, Charlie Kaufman, and other paradigm-busting talents reimagining movies for the new century.

The whole rich story is here: Herman Mankiewicz and the telegram he sent from Hollywood to his friend Ben Hecht in New York: "Millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots." The unlikely sojourns of F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner as Hollywood screenwriters. The imposition of the Production Code in the early 1930s and the ingenious attempts of screenwriters to outwit the censors. How the script for *Casablanca*, "a disaster from start to finish," based on what James Agee judged to be "one of the world's worst plays," took shape in a chaotic frenzy of writing and rewriting—and how one of the most famous denouements in motion picture history wasn't scripted until a week after the last scheduled day of shooting—because they had to end the movie somehow.

Norman explores the dark days of the Hollywood blacklist that devastated and divided Hollywood's screenwriting community. He charts the rise of the writer-director in the early 1970s with names like Coppola, Lucas, and Allen and the disaster of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* that led the studios to retake control. He offers priceless portraits of the young William Hurt, Steven Spielberg, and Steven Soderbergh. And he describes the scare of 2005 when new technologies seemed to dry up the audience for movies, and the industry—along with its screenwriters—faced the necessity of reinventing itself as it had done before in the face of sound recording, color, widescreen, television, and other technological revolutions.

Impeccably researched, erudite, and filled with unforgettable stories of the too often overlooked, maligned, and abused men and women who devised the ideas that others brought to life in action and words on-screen, this is a unique and engrossing history of the quintessential art form of our time.

What Happens Next: A History of American Screenwriting Details

Date : Published October 23rd 2007 by Harmony

ISBN : 9780307383396

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Format : Hardcover 464 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Culture, Film, Language, Writing, History

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From Reader Review What Happens Next: A History of American Screenwriting for online ebook

Paul says

A history of screenwriting done with real panache. Not as systematic as a scholar might approach it (see works by Kristin Thompson for that kind of thing), but this is a very thorough, fun read.

Sidney says

A fascinating book for anyone with a serious interest in the history of the film industry

Duncan says

I told I read a lot of filmmaking books. Ok, writing. But, of course, what makes this book great is the gossip, none of which I can remember right now.

Lots of research went into this book, and it gives a great history of the rise, fall and rise of unions in Hollywood. Best quote: "I was too fucking busy, and vise versa," Dorothy Parker.

A really entertaining read of which I can remember very little. I read it in winter; perhaps that's why.

Nancy Loe says

"Of all the Christ-bitten places and businesses in the two hemispheres, [Hollywood] is the last curly kink on the pig's tail." - Stephen Vincent Benet

This book sounds great!

Luke Devenish says

This was so entertaining. And totally fascinating. Finally a book about Old and New Hollywood told from the POV of those who are always somehow left out of the picture: the writers. Or should I say, THE LONG SUFFERING writers, because, man, did they do a lot of suffering. They also got paid a lot, too, so I won't shed too many tears, but perhaps the most illuminating aspect of a book that provides so many illuminations is the section explaining the origins of the schism between writers and producers, and why each STILL regards the other with suspicion, if not outright disdain. Depressing really, mainly because each 'side' settled into a default position from which they've never shifted and which is now the international standard. Grim reality apart, the legendary figures who stride across these pages make for a vast amount of fun. Who knew Casablanca was such a schmoeze behind the scenes? Who knew Thomas Ince (a Producer!) was the

inventor of screenplay formatting? Who knew William Faulkner was such a big, fat phony? For all the writers' trials (literally so, in the 50s) I still read this book feeling as if I'd been born in the wrong time and country. How I would have loved to have been among that raucous throng churning out studio product in the Golden Age. All those old soaks who sat around whining about it. I may well have soaked with the best of them, but I never would have whined! Too much damn joy in it all. Great book.

Karen Krizanovich says

A bit overwritten so far but hey...

Ben says

Norman's history of Hollywood from the POV of the Screenwriter provides one of the most cogent takes on the film industry. It is through the changing use of story (and storytellers) that cinema has evolved. The book plays out generally chronologically, with major sections devoted to major events and major writers, particularly those who best encapsulated a particular era or were a force unto themselves (Ben Hecht, Paddy Chayefsky).

Greig says

Great history of screen writing especially during the Hollywood years. The account of the attempts to set up a guild in the 1930's is fascinating. I think the account of HUAC and the blacklist is perhaps the best I've read. A very clear account. I found the chapters on the auteur theory and writer directors in the 70's and 80's less than compelling.

Adrian says

A chatty, breezy history of Hollywood through the medium of screenwriting. But this description is not to belittle it, Norman is thorough and enlightening and covers all the major shifts in moviemaking- the advent of sound films over silent, the studio system, the unionization of screenwriters, the McCarthy blacklist and auteur era. He's liberal in his use of juicy anecdote. There are also excellent portraits of wannabe screenwriters like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathaniel West and William Faulkner as well as the real McKoy like Dalton Trumbo, Herman Mankiewicz and Paddy Chayefsky. A must read for all cinephiles.

Henry Sheppard says

This is a large, dense, fascinating history of the rise and fall of screenwriters, individually and collectively, across the history of the movies. I enjoyed and recommend it, but I have to caution that it is not 'The Moon's a Balloon,' or anything like that.

Brynn says

Fascinating history. The writers so often get shorted in favor of the stars, directors and even producers. It was great to finally read a book about the industry that puts the story tellers first.

Steven says

Really cool history of the film industry from the perspective of the writer from the silent era, through talkies, the blacklist, Easy Rider days, 80's blockbusters and post modern Tarantino. The early writers were interesting characters themselves. Cool insights into the writing of Star Wars and a breakdown of Pulp Fiction.

Mike Horne says

Nice little history of Hollywood from the perspective of screenwriters. Read it for my Film Studies class. Good reading!
