

[Konkle on Smyth, 'Nobody's Girl Friday: The Women Who Ran Hollywood'](#)

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The following book review from H-California may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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J. E. Smyth. *Nobody's Girl Friday: The Women Who Ran Hollywood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 328 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-084082-2.

Reviewed by Amanda Konkle (Georgia Southern University) **Published on** H-California (August, 2018) **Commissioned by** Khal Schneider

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The Best Time for Women in Hollywood

J. E. Smyth's *Nobody's Girl Friday: The Women who Ran Hollywood* (2018, Oxford University Press) challenges historians who insist that during the Hollywood studio era (from around 1920 to 1960) women were submissive "'girl Fridays' at their boss's beck and call" (p. xii). This incorrect idea about women in Hollywood arises from two aspects of contemporary film studies, according to Smyth: 1) feminist film studies are determined to record women's objectification on screen and disempowerment in the industry and 2) auteur-centered film studies attribute all significant filmmaking decisions to the (almost always) male director. As Smyth asks near the end of the book, "In ... lambasting studio-era Hollywood as a misogynist industry, have the post-studio system media 'professionals' and public turned on the American business that was once most inclined to promote women's careers?" (p. 212). In contrast to those who presume studio-era Hollywood was misogynist, Smyth argues that women working in Hollywood were more likely to have their opinions respected and produce innovative work in the studio era than in the current era.

Smyth proves this argument by looking at both the remarkable successes of exceptional individual women in Hollywood and the many women who worked behind the scenes in Hollywood careers without much public recognition. During the studio era, up to 40 percent of Hollywood workers were women (p. 10). Smyth devotes much space to the many women who were members of the Screen Writers Guild or the Society of Motion Picture Film Editors, and she also recovers the names of women who were on the studio payrolls but whose contributions to filmmaking have been overlooked.

Smyth's evidence hails from studio newsletters and archives, newspaper reports, guild reports and official rosters, trade papers, and sometimes even studio phone books. The studio phone book and newsletters, in particular, illustrate the communal nature of the studio system; as Smyth points out, "In the phone book, everyone looks equal in the MGM family" (p. 15). Such a detail illustrates the collaborative nature of all filmmaking and shows how vital women's work was to the final products of the film industry. In her efforts to present a fuller picture of the women working in Hollywood during the studio era, Smyth discusses not only what the women did for individual productions and within the studios, but also their "union activities, political commitments, war work, and home life" (p. 22).

Smyth analyzes in depth two actresses: Bette Davis, who "came closest to having it all" (p. 59), and Katherine Hepburn, who has been lauded as a feminist in recent years, but who did not participate in the community of women the book outlines. Smyth points out that Davis worked as a "team player" both within and beyond the Warner Bros. studio: "As president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, president of the Hollywood Canteen, and public Democrat, she built networks of working women inside Hollywood and inspired her female fans to develop their independent political voice and faith in equal rights" (p. 28). In contrast, Hepburn distanced herself from fans and "compromise[d] her political principles for her job" (p. 230). Thus, the actress we today associate with studio-era feminism, Smyth argues, is a weak example of it.

Smyth also examines the lives of little-known Hollywood heavyweights Mary C. McCall, three-term president of the Screen Writers Guild, and prominent film editor Barbara McLean. McCall championed the union contract for screenwriters and pushed studios to uphold its terms during World War II. McLean and the other film editors of the period possessed similar power and influence. They suggested shots to the directors, and, Smyth argues, were at least partly responsible for their respective studios' "house styles" (p. 159). Smyth also examines the careers of two designers: Edith Head, who "claimed the limelight and built an empire for herself at Paramount, paradoxically stressing her connection with the average woman," and Dorothy Jeakins, who "remained an independent, experimental, and intellectual designer, embracing realism of the period design rather than the temptations for display and glamour" (p. 208).

In addition to examining the careers of prominent individual women in detail, Smyth includes chapters examining the careers of lesser-known women who worked behind the scenes in Hollywood "as executive secretaries, assistant to the vice president in charge of production, heads of scenario, heads of research, independent publicists, technical advisors, readers, screenwriters, and agents" (p. 63). Smyth demonstrates that these women were vital to the studio heads who received the credit for calling the shots; for example, she argues that Dorothy Hechtlinger was largely responsible for Twentieth Century-Fox studio head Darryl F. Zanuck's distinctive voice in production memos because, as his secretary, she recorded and edited them (p. 68). Smyth also examines prominent female producers of the period, including Constance Bennett, Joan Harrison, and Virginia Van Upp.

Many of the chapters effectively trace the unexpected reversal of women's fortunes in Hollywood, demonstrating how the power and prestige women had in the 1930s and 1940s was abruptly reversed in the 1950s. This narrative allows Smyth to explore women's changing political affiliations, as well as the effects of the blacklist and the general cultural pressures for men to return to work and women to return home in the postwar era.

Smyth's work is a historical account, and as such it enumerates forgotten facts and the names of significant women without analyzing the films on which these women worked. The book therefore serves as an excellent foundation for researchers to build upon as they analyze the specific contributions the women Smyth introduces here made to individual films.

The book at times suffers from the author's familiarity with the subject; films are often introduced by name only after the author has been discussing them for a paragraph or two. For those very familiar with classical Hollywood films, this will not be a problem, and, overall, Smyth's book presents a fascinating untold story, focused not on Hollywood stars but on the women behind the scenes who have remained unnamed for too long.

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