An interview with Patrick McGilligan, author of *Woody Allen: A Travesty of a Mockery of a Sham*: “I identify with people who have troubles and flaws, and are complicated human beings”

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16 April 2025

The WSWS spoke recently with Patrick McGilligan, author of Woody Allen: A Travesty of a Mockery of a Sham.

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David Walsh: Your Woody Allen biography is a very interesting, meticulous book. One way or another, it manages to provide a picture of a portion of American cultural history over several decades.

The reader gets a clear picture of Woody Allen and the people around him, and their strengths and weaknesses. Those weaknesses are real, but there is something enduring in his work, despite all the secondary, extraneous or occasionally trivial aspects of it.

I have to start though with your own extraordinary body of work! Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’ve written books about James Cagney, Ginger Rogers, Jack Nicholson, Orson Welles, Fritz Lang, Mel Brooks, Robert Altman, Clint Eastwood, Oscar Micheaux, Alfred Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray and others. You also edited or co-edited various volumes, including importantly, *Tender Comrades* [profiles of and interviews with blacklist victims], as well as interviews with Hollywood legends [*Film Crazy*] and interviews with screenwriters [*Backstory*]. How many volumes of those were there?

Patrick McGilligan: Five volumes of *Backstory* and two volumes of *Film Crazy*.

DW: It’s an impressive history. For the benefit of the readers, or, for that matter, for my own benefit, could you briefly give a bit of life history and explain how you got into writing about film?

PM: The truth is, I didn’t grow up watching movies, even though my mother actually studied briefly at the Pasadena Playhouse. But we never even were told about her fling at show business, until we were grown.

We were Catholic and raised in downtown Madison, Wisconsin. The last thing in the world we were likely to do was go to a movie. Meaning we never did, because it cost money, and it was sinful.

I went off to the University of Wisconsin in 1969, which was only a half mile away from my childhood home. It was the peak of exciting things going on in the world, and terrible things too—I’m being ironic. I fell in with a group of older radicals, many from the East Coast and most of whom had watched way too many movies on late night TV in New York City, but it made them very sophisticated about film.

They were generally older than me. Some of them became quite well known, like Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington (neither from the East Coast, by the way) and Gerald Peary and his brother Danny Peary, Karen Kay, a whole impressive list of people. They were smart, interesting and radical. They–we–were trying to shut down the university for anti-war, anti-racist and related causes, while at the same time we were plumbing the university film archives and watching 35mm prints of old films.

I’d follow them into the archives during the day and watch, let’s say, two or three Anthony Mann shipboard musicals from the ’40s, because that’s what the “gray beards” had scheduled to watch. Some of them actually did have gray beards. Then we’d go to a library mall rally at noon. At night we’d protest and try to shut down the university.

They liked to quote the great Caribbean Marxist C.L.R. James, something to the effect that if we have a chance to see *Birth of a Nation* in a film studies class or at a campus film society showing, then we should sneak in and see it, then picket it the next time there is a screening.

I had a teaching assistant who was willing to let me write a term paper about Jimmy Cagney as an “Independent Study”—one of the ways to get out of going to the classes we were trying to shut down. I don’t think I had ever seen a Jimmy Cagney movie before. I started watching Cagney movies sequentially, starting from the first in 1929, I think it is, because the UW archives had prints of all the Warner Brothers films into the 1950s. I wrote a term paper, I got an A, and the teaching assistant said to me, “Have you ever thought of turning this into a film journal article?” I said, “Well, is there any money in that?” He said, “There might be a little money … there happens to be this great film journal on campus called *The Velvet Light Trap*.”

I began working on my term paper on Jimmy Cagney by comparing his movies, in the 1930s, to those of Humphrey Bogart, but I soon dropped Bogart and felt more drawn to Cagney because of his left-liberal politics in the ’30s, which are reflected in his roles and movies in various ways. At that time, 1969, there were no books about Cagney and people hadn’t really written in-depth about him.

When I turned in my film article to one of the wise gray beards, Russell Campbell, the editor of *The Velvet Light Trap*, who was a graduate student from New Zealand, bless him, Russell said, “This is good. Have you ever considered turning it into a book?” I said, “Is there any money in that?” Russell said (he himself was already a book author), “Not much.” But I was hooked.

So, I went into the campus bookstore and explored its film books section for the first time, and copied down the names and addresses of five publishers and/or editors who were thanked in acknowledgments.

I spent what I considered to be a tremendous amount of money I didn’t

have on making five pristine copies of my article and mailing it off with cover letters to five publishers and editors, and Tantivy Press in London wrote back, saying, "We'll give you a $500 contract if you can write a book about Jimmy Cagney." So, I was contracted to write a book about Cagney as an undergrad.

It took me a few years to finish that book, which is still a calling card. I struggled to write the book once I had a contract, however, and I feel, while it has virtues, the writing fell short. It got a review from [critic] David Thomson, who became my friend later. He wrote, in *Sight and Sound*, something like, "This is a very interesting book, albeit badly written." He was right! The book has many adherents in France particularly because the title of the book was *Cagney: The Actor as Auteur*, and I made the then-novel argument that an auteur didn't have to be a director—he could be a star who is invested in his persona and filmography and works closely with the writers and directors.

To make a long story short, I wrote a few other small books like one on Ginger Rogers for the Pyramid series [1975], and then I left books behind in favor of newspaper and magazine work.

There was a point, in the early 1980s at which the American Film Institute [AFI] contacted me and said, "We'd like to have more copies of your Cagney book to offer to our members in conjunction with the annual AFI awards. Can you sell us a thousand?" I wrote back, "Well, I don't have a thousand copies, but if you are willing to publish that many, I would rewrite the whole book for free, improve on it, and then you would have a better book anyway." I was living in Hollywood at the time, working as a Senior Editor for *Playgirl* magazine–at the same time my wife was working for the Associated Press and the trade papers–and that's when I got serious about interviewing screenwriters and radicals, which I had not done when I wrote the first edition. The first version of the Cagney book was researched almost entirely in the UW library.

Writing about the Hollywood blacklist, meeting and interviewing blacklisted people–including veteran scenarists of Cagney movies who had been blacklisted for their Communist Party membership–became a way of writing about the politics and the movements of the 1960s. It felt too soon to write about the 1960s, and by comparison the blacklisted generation seemed admirable and enduring. After living in Hollywood and working for *Playgirl* magazine, I got burned out on newspapers and magazines and decided I would go back to writing books incorporating the research and interviewing methods I had honed in journalism. I decided I would rather be a stay-at-home in my pajamas and not be guaranteed a weekly paycheck. At the end of 1984 we moved back from Los Angeles to Wisconsin, to Milwaukee, where I had never lived or visited really, except for Milwaukee Braves games and Black Panther Party meetings in church basements. For me, Milwaukee was an exotic place to settle down, have children and devote myself to writing bigger, serious books. Sorry, long answer.

DW: No, that's an interesting answer.

PM: For years, I thought I would someday make a living as an author. And the answer is, I was wrong. But I "almost made a living," and now it's too late. Now I'm happy about the decision anyway. It was a healthy decision.

In terms of my career, such as you may describe it, the Robert Altman and George Cukor books got me going in the direction of important books with tremendous research and numerous interviews supporting a biography.

I ended up writing many books, and I edited many more, and ghosted some. I was for 20-25 years an editor at TSR, which became Wizards of the Coast. And that was/is the home of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which inspired the famous *Dragonlance* series of books. I edited, literally, hundreds of books in mass market science fantasy based on *Dragonlance* and other company fictional worlds. I want to make it clear I personally harbor no interest in science fantasy or fiction, zero. But if I can understand a piece of writing, I can edit it. Today I am also the film series books editor for both the University of Kentucky Press and the University of Wisconsin Press, but this is rarely line editing; it is more consulting, advising and scouting for books.

I like all the books I have written and am proud of them, and they did feed me. I travel around the world, or I go into a library somewhere, or someone's home, or into a tiny little bookstore in, say, Argentina, and there is my Clint Eastwood book in Spanish.

DW: Well, you have so many books, one is almost bound to be there!

PM: What I'm saying is my books make me perpetually happy and proud after I am done with one of them. I'm only happy after I'm done. During the writing, they are a torture. But when I'm done, I'm happy forever, and it doesn't wear off, it doesn't stop, because you can't pulp them all and erase them from the earth, as hard as you might try. Of course, I don't walk around beaming. But I write my books as well as I can, under the circumstances, and that gives me lasting pride and pleasure.

DW: How do you choose the people you write about?

PM: Honestly, the real reason I write a book is because some editor says yes to a contract for the subject.

DW: But do you propose the idea?

PM: I do generally. And they often disagree violently with my ideas. So, you reach an agreement on an idea an editor is willing to accept. In fact, Woody Allen was not my idea and was not even on my list of ideas. Woody Allen was the farthest from my mind.

Why wasn't he on my mind? Probably because he's such a tricky and difficult subject. The very thought of it was onerous and burdensome. I had just finished a big book about Mel Brooks. I wasn't ready to contemplate another Jewish comedian-filmmaker from New York, which requires from me a lot of diligent thinking, a lot of time involved in sifting and winnowing, even before I write word one. Plus, Allen is someone with such a vast body of work. I'd have to see (or re-see) all the films and integrate them into the life story.

Mel is a rather monomaniacal figure as a filmmaker, much less as a person. You're more or less writing about the same traits and quirks in his work and private life, over and over again, as opposed to Woody who veers wildly in this and that direction in his work and made many abrupt shifts in his life and career. Also, Mel has directed or produced maybe two dozen films, I'd have to look the number up. Woody is up to 60 or 70 counting television, plays, films he merely scripted or starred in …

The good thing is that at the end of the day, meaning at the end of your life, there is a logic to what you've done, what you've written, which is a kind of fate. There is a logic simply in the connections between Mel and Woody, both Jewish filmmakers specializing in comedy from New York, old acquaintances who worked together as writers for [comic] Sid Caesar [on his television show]. Eventually, after my editor said no to everyone on my list, and I said no to everyone on my editor's list, he asked me whether I would write about Woody Allen. I said yes with a gulp, knowing it was a tall order.

In some cases, I have tried to get out of contracts when the subjects daunted me. I was famous for signing a contract and then calling up six months later and saying, "Hey, I think this is a really a mistake." I was writing the Clint Eastwood book, for example, and I went out to Hollywood and had dinner with Richard Schickel, another Wisconsin guy from an earlier generation, who was working on Clint's authorized biography. After a nice dinner with Schickel, during which he boasted about what a great storyteller Clint was and how Clint remembered everything that ever happened to him, I went straight to a phone niche–which they used to have in Los Angeles near Joe Allen's—and called my editor in New York. I said, "I think we're really making a mistake, proceeding with this book. Schickel has it all gift-wrapped."

I went to work eagerly when I received the Woody Allen contract, because the contract was very generous, the most generous I've ever had,

without my having had to write a single word of proposal because of the editor's enthusiasm. Later I said to him, when I was trying to weasel out of the book because it had become such an albatross—I said, "Gee, Woody's own book only sold 15 or 16,000 hardcover copies. Why do you want a Woody Allen book from me anyway?" The editor said, very kindly, "Pat, yours is going to be better and sell more." Because, bless them, that's the way editors are paid to think. Obviously though, it wasn't and isn't true.

Anyway, if you write good books they stay in print and people keep returning to them for whatever reason, sometimes because they're reissued, there's an anniversary or death, or they are issued in foreign language editions. You could buy my books in stores more easily in Spain today, because they still have bookstores in Spain, than you could in America, other than at the Strand Bookstore [in New York City]. That's because they're in print and they sell, and that's a bit of an annuity. I write books that I want to stay in print and sell, and that remain attractive in foreign markets too.

Sometimes books do poorly in the marketplace for reasons that are wrongheaded beginning with the publisher, not me. My Nicholas Ray book, for example, was never going to make its money back, but the book I really wanted to write was an Oscar Micheaux biography–so the publisher gave me a lowball two-book deal, and I flipped the order, writing Micheaux first and later tried to wriggle out of writing the Nick Ray, which incidentally is a perfectly good book and fascinating life story–just not in the least commercial.

For the Hitchcock book I got overpaid, but I wasn't going to complain and then it took years to write so I wasn't making that much money anyway. The book did not receive tremendous publicity. It didn't get tremendously positive reviews or chalk up sales. In fact, it didn't make any money in America for ten years. I think we were all a little surprised and disappointed by how it landed with a thud. Over time, though, my Hitchcock book has come to be regarded as the standard biography, with a lot of information and insight that can't be found elsewhere. And after ten years my Hitchcock biography began to pay royalties and sell every year to pay more royalties and it continues to sell foreign rights. But it took ten years to make its advance back.

The Woody Allen book will also take ten years, if it ever makes money, because the difference between the two figures, both of whom directed 50-plus movies–which makes a diligent book such a chore–the difference between the two is Hitchcock's name is magic and Woody's name is poison, and that will possibly last forever or at least throughout my lifetime. Meaning Hitchcock's name will always be magic and Woody's name, unfortunately, might always be poison.

People have reviewed the Woody Allen book and said the book is good, but they still don't like Woody Allen, meaning they don't like him personally and they have cooled on his films. But, in fact, out of the 25 or so major books I've written—if you exclude the interview books with blacklisted people and screenwriters, who I tend to bond with —I've only personally liked two of my subjects, and you couldn't guess which ones.

DW: I won't try.

PM: That has to do with my sensibility, which I don't necessarily advertise or shout to the skies. I don't write in my Woody Allen book that I love *Stardust Memories* so much my lips tremble just to mention it. I don't tell people I love *Deconstructing Harry*. I don't care to tell people because the book isn't about what I like or admire. It's about Woody and things that mattered in his life and career.

Do I find things to like and admire about Woody? Yes. Did I try to meet him? No. I went to hear him play music at the Café Carlyle one night because I was in New York, and from where I sat he had to brush by me on the way to the bandstand. The waiter offered to stop him for a moment and take a snapshot of him and me, even though the waiter had no idea what I was doing there. The waiter thought if he did that he would get a $20 tip, which is fair enough. I was very tempted because that would make a funny author's dustjacket photograph, where the author's eyes are swiveling, and Woody is dashing by. But I couldn't decide if that was a craven and unprofessional thing to do, so I said no.

Anyway, I would have nothing to ask Woody other than a question or two that he might have never heard uttered aloud before in his presence and might make him want to jump across the table and strangle me. He has given approximately 10,000 interviews, and if you called him up tomorrow, he'd probably pick up the phone and talk to you, because that's the kind of a guy he is. So, I didn't have any burning questions that weren't impertinent questions unnecessary to ask.

For example, I'm now puttering away on a book about Catherine Deneuve, and incidentally, I speak almost zero French and all I can do with my bad French is order off a menu in Paris. Yet I don't have to speak French because I have 10,000 interviews with her in my office, and AI takes care of the French translation and then a French assistant can help me with the parts that are really important that I can't trust AI on. This is even before you get to the four or six hundred interviews with her in English, because there are many, many. So, I don't need to meet her, or need to like her, although I will tell you I caught a glimpse her at a French embassy party honoring her for *The Last Metro* in Los Angeles years ago–and it was a memorable glimpse.

Back in the good old 1980s, starting out again, I thought I had to interview everybody I could track down in someone's life and career, and that was a big part of the job. That has changed for a lot of reasons. It changes because some people have been interviewed 10,000 times. It's hubris for me to say to myself, "I could ask Woody a question no one else has ever asked him," other than the impertinent, disrespectful ones to which he would certainly not reply on the record. And these impertinent questions have little to do with whatever you think is the most exciting question you could possibly ask Woody Allen. It's just my own little points of curiosity.

I have met Mel Brooks but did not interview him in-depth, per se. I was on the set watching part of the filming of *History of the World, Part I*. When I lived in LA, we used to see Mel Brooks around town all the time, conspicuous in restaurants and on the street. But I also had a stack of 10,000 interviews with him in my office. Do you think he's shy? Do you think he shrinks from questions? Toward the very end of my work on the Mel Brooks book, I had a proffer through an intermediary–Mel would be interested in giving me an interview for my book. I didn't respond. Same reason–I only had disrespectful questions, nothing important, only little points of curiosity. I didn't want him inside my head, shouting at me.

If someone has never given an interview and is a hard get, then I'm interested and I try. For example, in the Woody Allen book, there's an interview with Judy Henske, his onetime girlfriend from the mid-1960s, the left-wing folk singer from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, who was one of the models for the character of Annie Hall. Judy had never given an interview about her romance with Woody, and I was intrigued. So, I tracked her down and won her over with my Wisconsin ties, and then she won me over with charm and intelligence.

There are times when I really drill down trying to reach people, I admit, and fail. As I said, when I started out writing about Jimmy Cagney, there was no book about him. There was no serious scholarship about Cagney. He hadn't given an interview for twenty years. He was a hermit, retired from movies in 1961 after Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three* and had not been seen again, heard of again, had given no interviews. So, an interview with Jimmy Cagney was supremely tempting, and I tried my darndest and failed to wangle an interview with him. Five, six, seven years later, he was giving interviews around the clock because his doctor told him to go back to work and get out of retirement because he'd live longer. I had several charming, lovely letters from him, which I quoted in books, because I wrote small books about the scripts of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and *White*

Heat, I got to know his family, but I never met or spoke to Jimmy in person.

Nowadays the job has changed, and everybody in Hollywood is acutely aware that everything they might say is going to go out on social media and get them condemned or forever imprisoned by their words. Everyone nowadays speaks mainly for promotion and publicity. I think it's different for people like Woody and Mel, who are old-time professionals when it comes to publicity and the press. They are extremely practiced, and nothing fazes them. But that generation is dying.

DW: Are you going to get abuse because you've written a book about Woody Allen?

PM: Maybe. But I wrote it in such a way as to limit that reaction. I was factual and I was careful in my language. I was keenly aware of the trap I was walking into, as was HarperCollins. HarperCollins had a lawyer look at my text very closely. And lawyers are very good copy editors. They really catch things that are stupidly written and can get you into trouble, as well as scrutinizing your methods to see how intelligent you are about any particular issue being addressed on the page. The HarperCollins lawyer turned out to be a vital champion of the book, in-house, because he thought I did a great job of being sensible and judicious.

I did try to be fair to all parties and as the author I restrained myself from making grand pronouncements about what happened or what didn't happen with Dylan Farrow and Woody. I tried to look at all sides. I tried to let all parties have their say. I do that with all my books, but people are more familiar–or think they are more familiar–with the high stakes of Woody's personal behavior.

I've been giving a lot of interviews with the Woody Allen book, and I try to refrain from giving my public opinion about a lot of things–not only which of his films I like, or don't like. I'm not a very judgmental person about people's personal behavior and their personal morality anyway. Especially with Hollywood people, I find that stance to be very silly.

I wanted to write a book that also took into account the attitudes and opinions of people who hate Woody or his movies, to some extent. I don't side with the people who hate his movies, but I wanted to be fair to them, and also to be fair to Dylan and Mia's side of the controversy. I tried to accurately report their version of events, their views, their thinking.

Telling such a complicated life story can be a bitch. It's a bitch because it's a very difficult rat's nest to unravel. If the mailman stopped you outside your door and told you his life story for an hour or so, it would be fascinating, I'm sure. But after hearing the story, and maybe talking to other people and doing a little research and reporting to assess its accuracy, your job is to regurgitate the story into a book that is exciting to read. That's a hard job. It's a life story, and I'm as interested in the story as the life.

I insist that I do this job differently than every other film biographer. Or they do theirs differently than me. Back when I was a film critic for the *Boston Globe*, when I was reviewing a film, I would I recount the story of the film–which isn't always easy–and say who acts in it, and maybe give out some background information. The over-all goal was to help the reader understand what the film was like, give them a feel for it, in case they might want to go check it out for themselves.

I do have an admiration and a liking for Allen as a performer, as well as hesitancies and questions about his behavior personally and professionally, at times–not always. He's a very good, possibly great filmmaker, no question. He's artistic or he seeks to be artistic. And he is a writer; he writes every day, and I have a soft spot for writers. A great soft spot for writers.

DW: You say the book is balanced and fair, which it is. But you quite rightly use the word "McCarthyism" in the book. You describe the blackballing of his films. That's a judgment, I would hope.

PM: I make cultural judgments all the time. For example, if I say Robert Altman's *Nashville* is perfectly timed for 1975 as a caustic vision of the bicentennial, that is a cultural comment. If I say I try not to be moralistic or judgmental, I make an exception about blacklisting. You can say that's a cultural or political judgement.

Listen, I look for themes in someone's life story. A good life story has a hero, supporting characters, a plot and arc, themes and motifs. Woody Allen is a guy who, in the course of his life and career, interacted with Alvah Bessie, one of the Hollywood Ten blacklist victims, who became a friend and to some extent mentor. Woody later starred in a fine movie about the blacklist, *The Front*.

Then comes, let's say, the third act of Woody's life, and he himself becomes the subject of blacklisting. And, let's be frank, it's successful blacklisting. He is well and truly canceled. This is a theme in his life story you can't ignore. His cancellation is a form of McCarthyism. Now, you can say "I'm in favor of McCarthyism when the person is a serial abuser of women or a serial abuser of children." I would be too, but Woody is not. Or let us say, it can't be proven that he is. Do I like it when some Trump right-wing idiot gets canceled? I don't care. I don't lose sleep over it.

But I do care about Woody's case. I wouldn't describe the 1992 and 1993 revelations and trial as McCarthyism. It was Woody shooting himself in the foot and then paying the piper. But later on, what happens to him, I compare it to McCarthyism or the HUAC witch hunt. I compare his life story–including his affairs with young women–to Chaplin's life story. Chaplin was also blacklisted and driven out of America for his last movies.

DW: It's not even a question of presumed innocence because it's never been raised to the level of a charge of any crime.

PM: Never charged, never tried, never convicted, never even sued.

The Farrow side—not all of the Farrows of course—have said what they wanted to say publicly, and Woody has said what he wanted to say publicly. The police, the various child services authorities and so on have all said their piece publicly. It can be chronicled and assessed.

All I did is try to fairly report all those actions and events, and then look very carefully at the chronology and the claims and counterclaims, and try to understand what happened, as much as it can be understood. Then I retell that story as a story to the reader. Years after 1992-93, when Dylan Farrow resurfaced with her allegations, and the Farrow family and other powerful public figures really worked hard to whip up antipathy towards Woody and his films–trying very hard to whip up a mob frenzy and blacklist–that becomes a modern McCarthyism. The Farrows were very zealous and eager about cancelling Woody, and what can I say? Largely, it worked.

DW: Why do you think it worked?

PM: It probably worked because of the America we live in. I try to avoid talking about this in a broad political or intellectual way in the book, because it would take up space. But it probably works partly because there's some antisemitism involved and also Puritanism. There are political winds whipsawing in various directions. There are the #MeToo winds, but also the Trump winds are blowing too. The politics of the era were such that society accepted his cancellation.

In Woody's case, as I said, I try to report on what happened as truthfully as possible, looking at the facts and opinions on all sides. But the problem for Woody haters is it adds up to a case in which there is no factual evidence, even for–you'd have to say–any charges or formal allegations. I'm not sure there was ever enough factual evidence to bring charges. Yes, someone says something happened, a seven-year-old girl said something terrible happened to her, and yes, that should be investigated. And it was investigated. You can read the story in my book.

But do you have children, or have you ever had a seven-year-old child tell you a whopper? Do you know about the Scottsboro Boys who were convicted and almost executed and spent a long time in prison for something young white women falsely accused them of? Or the McMartin

case? Children who said parents and caretakers did terrible things to them, and trials and investigations happened, and eventually, it was all thrown out because nothing of the sort had occurred. It was wild imaginations gone amok. You have to consider the possibility of wild fantasy under the pressure of bizarre family circumstances in the Farrow-Woody Allen case.

The title of my book is *A Travesty of a Mockery of a Sham*. That title made HarperCollins very nervous at first. My initial editor, a wonderful guy, said, "Pat, you can't say it's a travesty of a mockery of a sham." And I answered, "I'm not saying it. I'm quoting Woody saying it–it is what he says in his own defense in the courtroom scene of *Bananas*!" I think it's a good comic title for a life and career ruined by accusations that can't be proven.

The reviewers, who praise the book but say Woody still gives them the creeps, they're not sure he did anything, but they still don't like him and his movies and they point to movies in which he features female characters in various subservient roles–the young high schooler played by Mariel Hemingway in *Manhattan* is the prime example. That's obviously an autobiographical aspect of his filmmaking that is crucial to write about and take apart–an aspect of his work that offends more people today than when they saw *Manhattan* in 1979. Although critics, even many female critics polled for my book, still rate it among Woody's Top Five.

DW: You have a nice comment in the book, in the afterword:

"I am long past dividing ordinary people, much less famous movie people, into sinner or saint categories. As a biographer I am interested in the personality, the character, the values, and behavior of my subjects—encompassing their faults as well as their admirable qualities—but I try not to adopt a moral high ground. I endeavor to understand how their lives influence the patterns and themes of their motion pictures."

I think that's a very good statement.

PM: I tried very hard to end with a sort of credo so people could understand where I was coming from. Although most people who read my books understand that is always my approach. Fritz Lang possibly murdered his wife or killed her by accident. Clint Eastwood had one family in public, then when they called "Cut" after a day's shooting on *Rawhide*, he went home to another wife and child, pushing a stroller around the block. By any definition, that's behavior that Mormons might consider permissible but most people do not. Jack Nicholson's mother told him she was his sister, and we won't ever know who his true father was for sure. I don't find these to be hard things to accept. People are human. They have foibles and flaws.

For me, this is actually an exciting part of the job, difficult to figure out and write about, but exciting and I would have the same difficulty with the mailman. People have flaws, they have traits and behavior that dogs them through life, haunts them, mistakes they make, terrible mistakes, sometimes they act outside societal norms. I am not shocked or repelled by this. I am drawn to their peculiarities as a storyteller.

I myself live outside societal norms. I've been arrested and found myself in jail twice. My books have been attacked in the *Wall Street Journal*. I consider myself probably to be something of a scofflaw and a bohemian, neither a Republican nor a Democrat. I identify with people who have troubles and flaws, and are complicated human beings. I do draw the line at terrible crimes for which there is inarguable evidence. Especially serial crimes.

People have said to me about the Woody Allen book that I am kind of unflinching about Woody's questionable behavior and I hope that is so because I try to be unflinching, meaning I try not to be judgmental, and I try not to adopt a false morality that I don't claim in my own life.

Even as a kid, he had questionable behavior. You could say Woody has always existed in a bubble, as most of us do–our own bubbles. His preferred life relationship was the typewriter and himself. He doesn't warm to people in person. He doesn't want to shake hands. He doesn't want to make small talk. He doesn't want to go to lunch with Anjelica Huston during the making of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, even though she really would like to, because for him it would be waste of time. He wouldn't know what to say, and she would make him nervous.

On screen his persona is often loveable but the off-screen Woody is not warm and fuzzy. With Mel Brooks, there is less separation between the Mel Brooks you get on camera and the Mel Brooks off camera. You get the same person, amped up a little more on camera, but the same Mel Brooks. Woody is altogether different–and the on-screen Woody is a composite of the real Woody and a clever fictional creation that has kept moving and changing over the decades. He is a shapeshifter in his work, much more than Mel Brooks, and that fools people.

DW: I wanted to make another point. If an artist is good or important, he or she makes an objective contribution, an objective contribution that stands apart from his or her moral character.

We don't ask about the foibles of physicists or mathematicians so much, perhaps we will in the future. Someone may find out that Einstein kicked his dog and therefore relativity theory ought to be called into question. Whatever we discover, he made immense contributions apart, let's say, from whatever possibly stupid things he did. Artists also make objective contributions to all of us, and that has a certain significance and that has to be taken into account.

PM: For the most part I agree. It's what saves Woody, at least for you and me. In his films, he's not only artistic, he's often moral, deeply moral in profound and positive ways. For example, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is a profoundly moral film, and disturbing. Woody is usually a surrealist but he is profoundly moral and realistic about the characters in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*; he condemns their crimes, but he knows they won't be punished. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is still a very powerful film. I find *Broadway Danny Rose*, a larky movie, also profoundly humanist with a beautiful affection for oddball people. But, off-camera, when you meet Woody, or when you're working with him, or when you interview him, he doesn't wish to give you the warmth, humor or humanity of his best films.

As opposed to, let's say, Clint Eastwood, who, if you interview him, which I did for hours once, adopts an incredibly considerate affect, who makes sure your tea is hot and everything is copacetic. The opposite of Dirty Harry, or so it would appear. That is not Woody's thing. He rejects bringing out the humanist or lovable "schlub" on demand. Okay, but in his films he is often very humanistic and moral, and he aspires to artistic filmmaking, and I do love that.

I had to go back and watch many Woody Allen movies that I had missed or hadn't seen for a long time. And that's part of the daunting nature of the task because there are so many. I had to master the movies, by watching them repeatedly, which is a literal pain in the ass. But you know what? It was less arduous than watching the fewer number of films Mel directed. The worst of the Mel Brooks films are not that great. They're jokey, single-minded, and simplistic in their humor. Funny, yes, but not great. Woody has clinkers but he has a good batting average for so many times up at the plate.

Mel Brooks films are less searching, artistic. I even find *Midnight in Paris* to be a moving and eloquent romantic comedy. It's not Woody's greatest movie, but it has a very generous and humanistic spirit. In his best films Woody has empathy for his characters, and not just the ones he plays.

There will probably be no more Woody Allen films. Let's face it, his career is on its ass for years–has been on its ass for years–and the only thing that has kept it alive is that he defiantly keeps going. But there doesn't appear to be any future films on the horizon. He has trouble getting the movies made, trouble getting financing. The Woody-haters and blacklisters can give themselves a round of applause.

DW: What about the present political situation, what do you make of it?

PM: Well, you know, those damn Democrats deserve a lot of the blame. For ineptitude before you get to the rest of their faults. In the short term,

it's terrible for all the people who are being targeted, which is everybody who's not like a white nationalist rich man like Trump. Everybody who is not part of the in-crowd of billionaires and MAGA fanatics—immigrants, the non-white population, transgender people. It's horrible, horrible. There's no silver lining. It will affect American film too, which will become more timid and crassly commercial than it already is.

But as the blacklisted veterans always told me, you have to adopt the long view. The pendulum will swing back. What's happening is too crazy. Everything Trump is doing … well, there will have to be a climax, or an uprising of some sort. And there needs to be an alternative that isn't the Democratic Party.

We can conclude this interview, if you like, with a kind of bookend. When I started out writing about film, Russell Campbell, my *Velvet Light Trap* editor and all the other gray beards and older graduate students, they were frequently writing about the conjunction of history and film, and how history had influenced Hollywood and the American cinema, and how the films of the '30s and '40s reflected the history of the times and sometimes tried to positively sway the ongoing history. The films show the influence of the Hollywood left-wing of that era, and how they did good things.

When film historians and yes, biographers, go back and report on this Trump era of filmmaking, boy, it's going to be a great treasure trove to sort through–but it will also be a dismal treasure trove of terrible films we are watching that are ignoring the world of reality. The Woody Allen situation is going to be part of the dismal report. The fact that America took one of its greatest comedians and filmmakers and did its best to kill his career is shameful.

What is Hollywood doing about Trump? It is sleeping the nightmare away. All the brilliant, creative left-liberal, progressive people in Hollywood–well, I wouldn't say there are a lot of genuine radicals but there are some, and certainly the liberals are genuine. What are they doing? They could be doing something. They could do something with their great messaging abilities.

Everybody is taking it on the chin and waiting for something to happen. Something will happen, it always does. Something we can't predict because history surprises you. But what will happen, and when, how long? It's depressing now just to wake up in the morning.

DW: I don't have enough years left to catch up with all your books.

PM: Well, there are a lot of them. I always have to count them up when people ask me how many I have written, and I always forget one or two. People ask, "What is your favorite book of those you have written?" And I always answer, as Robert Altman did when he was asked which were his favorite film—they are all my children and I don't have favorites. But if I had to name one at the point of a gun I'd say *Tender Comrades*, for many reasons, the subject matter and the people who became my friends.

DW: So who are the two subjects you will admit to liking personally? Can you tell me now?

PM: Altman and Jack Nicholson. Both of whom I met and knew in passing. I liked them personally although I wouldn't say they liked me. Still, they're my kind of people–'60s people, you might say, in their eccentricities and values. Their sensibility, in films, is mine. Their films are my kind of filmmaking. And I like, in the case of their life stories, their hard-working work ethic, the messy but admirable lives they led. I admire their artistic integrity, their choices and what they did with their lives. There is almost nothing I don't like about them really. Jack is an errant character. So was Bob. But I like Altman films better than Hitchcock's. And I like Jack Nicholson's films, his performances, much, much better than Clint's.

DW: Well, I enjoyed this, thank you.

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