

Woody Allen: A Travesty of a Mockery of a Sham: A new biography of the filmmaker now “a social pariah in America”

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16 April 2025

Prolific film biographer and historian Patrick McGilligan has written an immensely valuable and entertaining biography of the American comic-filmmaker, *Woody Allen: A Travesty of a Mockery of a Sham*.

The book’s title is taken from the outraged courtroom interjection of Fielding Mellish (Allen), charged with “fraud, inciting to riot, conspiracy to overthrow the government and using the word ‘thighs’ in mixed company,” in the writer-director’s early film, *Bananas* (1971):

I object, your honor! This trial is a travesty. It’s a travesty of a mockery of a sham of a mockery of a travesty of two mockeries of a sham.

McGilligan provides the details of Allen’s complex personal and professional life over the course of many decades, including at least brief discussions of his more than 50 feature films.

The author has published work on numerous major film figures, including James Cagney, Robert Altman, George Cukor, Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, Orson Welles, Oscar Micheaux, Nicholas Ray, Mel Brooks, Jack Nicholson, Clint Eastwood and more. In addition, he was the co-editor (with Paul Buhle) of one of the most important works related to the Hollywood blacklist, *Tender Comrades*, profiles of and interviews with dozens of “red scare” victims. Furthermore, he has produced various volumes of interviews with screenwriters and assorted film industry legends.

Allen, who will turn 90 in November, has been a significant cultural presence in the US since the 1960s.

McGilligan traces out the details of his life. Born Allan Stewart Konigsberg in Brooklyn in 1935, Allen began writing jokes right out of high school. After a number of years as a writer for other comedians and television shows, he first became known to the wider public as a stand-up comic through nightclub and television appearances and successful comedy record albums. *Take the Money and Run* (1969) marked his feature film directorial debut, for all intents and purposes. In 1977, with *Annie Hall*, Allen took a more substantial direction. He directed an average of nearly one film a year for the next forty years.

However, Allen is now largely a “non-person” to the official American film world. Charges of child molestation were first brought against him in 1992, at which time they were investigated and rejected by authoritative bodies. Following the wave of #MeToo attacks in 2017, the old, discredited claims were revived and the campaign against him stepped up. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other leading media outlets made it their business to smear and discredit Allen. He was essentially blacklisted in the US and his films became almost impossible

to distribute. Allen directed his last film to date in France, *Coup de chance* (2023).

McGilligan takes the bull by the horn and discusses the controversy in detail. In the foreword to the biography, he writes:

One reality Woody Allen has been defying for a long while now is death. Not that Death: not the Dark Everlasting that haunts his movies, usually humorously, most recently in his penultimate film to date, *Rifkin’s Festival*, in which Death plays a mean game of chess. No—the living death of being declared an “unperson” by the Woke Generation, the most militant of whose representatives do not care if the entertainer has ever been charged or convicted of a crime, but they believe he molested his seven-year-old daughter in 1992, among the many other negative things about him they believe. These true believers have tried to blackball his films, pressure other celebrities into denouncing him, destroy his ability to direct more movies—‘cancel’ him as a person.

He comments that while Allen “fought comparisons to [Charlie] Chaplin,” in terms of their respective comic efforts, he nonetheless “fought the public hysteria and vilifications that consumed Chaplin’s final decades.”

The wealth of biographical detail assists enormously in formulating a critical evaluation of Allen as a filmmaker. In fact, he stands out as one of the most important American writer-directors of the past half-century, despite considerable fluctuations in the quality of his work. In that regard, it is no exaggeration to argue, as McGilligan does in the accompanying interview, that Allen “veers wildly in this and that direction in his work and [has] made many abrupt shifts in his life and career.”

Allen responds, one realizes, to opposed social and intellectual impulses. As McGilligan asserts in our conversation, certain of his works contain a powerful, incisive moral quality, condemnations of opportunism and corruption, including his own, the domination of money and commerce, the selfishness and complacency of the well-to-do. At other moments, Allen seems satisfied with banalities (“luck and coincidence prevail” in life, “the heart wants what it wants... There’s no logic to these things,” “we need some delusions to keep us going,” etc.) and a rather trite treatment of problems.

He followed his initial batch of fairly facetious efforts 1969-1975 (*Take the Money and Run*, *Bananas*, etc.) with his first and perhaps most fruitful period 1977-1992 (*Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *Stardust Memories*, *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy*, *Broadway Danny Rose*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Another Woman*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Husbands*

and Wives).

McGilligan notes, as Allen turned 40 in 1975,

he gave a birthday interview to the *New York Times*, announcing, “I want to do more risky films, less conventional ones, films I’m not secure with. I only just learned how to make films.”

However, it subsequently became possible to write Allen off as a director (and this writer did so) several times on the basis of clusters of weak, uninvolved films. We wrote sharply about *Sweet and Lowdown*, *Small Time Crooks*, *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, *Melinda and Melinda*, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, *Whatever Works*, *Blue Jasmine*, *Magic in the Moonlight*, *Irrational Man* and *Café Society*.

But Allen persisted. And in the new century he has also produced *Match Point*, *Cassandra’s Dream*, *Midnight in Paris*, *To Rome with Love*, *Wonder Wheel*, *A Rainy Day in New York*, *Rifkin’s Festival* and *Coup de chance*, not his finest work possibly, but films that contain insights in some cases, and charms in others. He seems determined to carry on, in part to spite the vicious McCarthyite campaign against him. There is more fight and life in his last four movies precisely because of his difficulties.

Allen came to prominence in the early 1960s. To be exact, McGilligan writes, 1963 “would be his breakthrough year, or the year of ‘the big noise,’” when clubs in the “historically rebellious, nonconformist [Greenwich] Village ... took him to heart.” This isn’t entirely accidental. 1963 was the “year of protest” in the US, over civil rights, poverty, jobs, including the massive March on Washington, as well as the traumatic assassination of a president.

Although Allen would never directly delve into political commentary, his comedy had an irreverent, mocking (and self-mocking) quality inseparable from growing anti-establishment moods. The humor is knowing and self-conscious, aware of itself in a new way. Young people turning away from the official version of things responded to his performances.

Despite everything, Allen has held on to a rebellious streak. The more serious strain in his films arrived in the 1970s, in the aftermath of tumultuous events—the end of the Vietnam war, Watergate and the resignation of Richard Nixon. To his credit, Allen launched the more artistic, thoughtful portion of his career at a time when the upper middle class in general was moving sharply to the right.

Allen demonstrated his seriousness and his intellectual resilience by developing or returning to a critique of the affluent or those desperately striving for affluence, as noted above, in such films as *Match Point* and *Cassandra’s Dream*, although he had to travel to Britain to do it. This aspect of his work has remained, and is lodged firmly in his most recent film, *Coup de chance*. His best work amuses, illuminates and endures. Would American cultural life in the past 50 years have been richer or (far) poorer without his presence?

McGilligan strives for fairness in his treatment of Allen’s personal travails, above all the campaign driven by the vindictive Mia Farrow and certain of her offspring. The charge that he abused his daughter Dylan, which arose in the aftermath of the revelation of his affair with Mia Farrow’s adopted daughter Soon-Yi Previn, opened the floodgates. McGilligan chronicles the generally deplorable role played by the media in the aftermath of his daughter Dylan’s sex-abuse charges.

For example,

One of the many ironies of the custody case, taken together with Dylan’s sex-abuse charges, is that many comedians joined the media pundits, film critics, religious leaders, and right-wing

politicians who ridiculed Allen, helping to guarantee that, for many people, the facts were forever blurred. The Simpsons made him a punching bag. Beavis and Butt-Head began referring to their penises as “my Woody Allen.” David Letterman and Jay Leno made repeated jokes at his expense on their late-night talk shows: “Mix Old Granddad with a Shirley Temple your wife ordered,” Leno quipped. Bill Maher dubbed Allen “the white O. J. Simpson.”

McGilligan points to the role of the *New York Times*, its columnist Nicholas Kristof and film critics Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott in poisoning the atmosphere against Allen.

Kristof, in 2014, published a column including Dylan Farrow’s claims. McGilligan, after referring to the columnist’s “textbook McCarthyism,” writes that

for the first time in the paper of record, Kristof opened the door to a generalized indictment of sex abusers, with the rote inclusion of Woody Allen’s name. “Look, none of us can be certain what happened,” the columnist wrote of the child-abuse claims. His column did not pretend to have investigated the allegations; Kristof referred to the incident as though all claims and counterclaims were common knowledge. “Shouldn’t the standard to honor someone be that they are unimpeachably, well, honorable?” Kristof warned rhetorically. “The Golden Globes sided with Allen, in effect accusing Dylan either of lying or not mattering. That’s the message that celebrities in film, music and sports too often send to abuse victims.”

In his chapter, “Mr. Nothing,” McGilligan notes that in early 2018, in the first months of the #MeToo campaign, Dargis and Scott “offered post-Dylan reappraisals of Allen’s cinematic legacy...akin to twin thunderbolts hurled by Hera and Zeus.”

In discussing her own previously published review of Allen’s *Wonder Wheel*, Dargis repeated her argument that the film

manifests some of his worst tendencies; the sexism is overt, and his blurring of life and art is repellent. In my review, I cited his marriage to Ms. Previn and Dylan Farrow’s allegations, a history I’ve seen as a malignant cloud. I had never referred to that history before because I hadn’t seen it in the work. Now I did.

Scott echoed his *Times* colleague, in McGilligan’s words,

with his famous—infamous to some—“My Woody Allen Problem” on January 31, in which the critic, like many in the growing anti-Woody camp, found as much fault with himself as with the director and his oeuvre. “I’ve seen all of his movies, and I think he’s guilty,” declared Scott, while referencing his discomfort at the “rape” joke in *Play It Again, Sam* and “the preoccupation with very young women” in many Allen films, particularly *Manhattan*. “What I find most ethically troubling about Mr. Allen’s work at present is the extent to which I and so many of my colleagues have ignored or minimized its uglier aspects.”

In an afterword to *A Travesty of a Mockery of a Sham*, McGilligan insists forthrightly that the subjects of his other film biographies had not been

strangers to unorthodox or criminal behavior. Fritz Lang possibly murdered his first wife. Nicholas Ray's teenage son went to bed with his wife, actress Gloria Grahame—who was his stepmother—and later the son and stepmother married. The great and only Oscar Micheaux was a plagiarist. Jack Nicholson will never know who his father really was because his mother slept around. At least twice in his life Clint Eastwood stepped out on the women with whom he shared an address, and fathered a “secret” family with fleeting girlfriends. Alfred Hitchcock may or may not have sexually harassed Tippi Hedren.

McGilligan adds that, typically, people who know the person he is writing about “ask to go off the record” with details or acts that are especially intimate or even negative.

On this book, I had the opposite experience. I never contacted so many people who had only positive things to say about Woody Allen but who didn't want to be quoted or identified because they did not want to be documented on the record in his favor. They worried about their own MeToo repercussions.

In one of his final observations in the afterword, marking the death of blacklist victim Walter Bernstein at 101 in 2021, McGilligan remarks that the deceased had written *The Front* (1976), set during the blacklist era in Hollywood. Allen starred in the film. McGilligan goes on,

The Front now appears prescient in speaking to the witch-hunt atmosphere surrounding Woody Allen's alleged crimes—an atmosphere of fear that has made Allen a social pariah in America.

McGilligan is humane, sympathetic and fair. *A Travesty of a Mockery of a Sham* is fascinating for its portrait of Allen, warts and all, and popular-cultural life in the US over the course of nearly half a century. McGilligan's work is highly recommended.



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