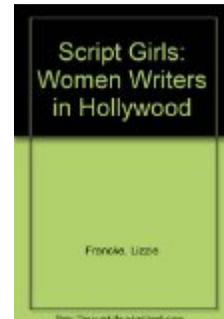


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lizzie Francke, British Film Institute. *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood*. London: British Film Institute, 1994. viii + 172 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-85170-478-4; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85170-477-7.

Reviewed by Steven Mintz (University of Houston)
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A scriptwriter, quipped Jay Presson Allen, stands “somewhere just below the publicists but above the hairdresser.” Challenging the conventional image of the chain-smoking, whiskey-guzzling male screenwriter, perched over his battered typewriter, *Script Girls* seeks to place current debates about women in the film industry in socio-historical perspective by recovering the lives of women screenwriters. Moving beyond those women writers who have long received notoriety—such as Anita Loos, Dorothy Parker, and Lillian Hellman—Francke shows that screenwriting is one of the few areas where women have consistently found employment in Hollywood. “Conceived in a celebratory mode” (2), the book nevertheless critically examines whether women screenwriters expressed a distinctive sensibility; and the extent to which their films contained feminist subtexts.

The book does a very effective job of bringing many previously neglected figures back to historical visibility, beginning with Gene Gauntier who wrote the screenplay for *Ben Hur* (1911) and Jeanie Macpherson, who was Cecil B. DeMille’s chief scenarist.

By the early '20s, Francke shows, scenario writing had become a more specialized, professional craft, and studio heads turned increasingly toward popular women writers, who had developed reputations outside cinema, such as the detective story writer Mary Robert Rhinehart, the novelist Gertrude Atherton, the romance writer Elinor Glyn, and to college educated women journalists. The booster press glamorized women screenwriters, while stressing that “all of them [are] normal, regular women. Not temperamental ‘artistes’, not short-haired advanced feminists, not faddists,” in the words of *Photoplay* (1923).

By the 40s and 50s, women screenwriters were increasingly likely to be members of writing “teams,” such as Phoebe Ephron (with Henry Ephron), Betty Comden (with Adolph Green), Fay Kanin (with Michael Kanin), Frances Goodrich (with Albert Hackett), and Ruth Gordon (with Garson Kanin).

One of Francke’s overarching themes is that over time Hollywood came increasingly to assume that women would write mainly for other women. More and more, when they worked on male-centered stories, it was to flesh out female roles. She also maintains that over time opportunities for women actresses and screenwriters to advance the careers of other women writers declined, in part reflecting the growing attack by male writers over the “tyranny of the woman writer,” first voiced in the 1930s.

Even specialists in film history are sure to be surprised by the number of women writers who played an active role in shaping Hollywood film. In the silent era and the '30s, she shows, the western—the archetypal masculine genre—attracted many women writers. During the 40s and early 50s, a staple genre for women screenwriters was a hybrid of melodrama and film noir—a legacy of the Gothic novel. In recent years, Francke argues, a renewed interest in the women’s audience and the genres traditionally associated with it have given a new visibility to women screenwriters and new opportunities to express a more open feminist aesthetic. Drawing on interviews with women in Hollywood today, such as Nora Ephron, Callie Khouri, and Caroline Thompson, the book concludes by examining the status and aspirations of women screenwriters in contemporary Hollywood.

A more analytical treatment would deal at greater

length with discrimination, salaries, career patterns, numbers, and the process by which women scriptwriters were channeled into certain subject matters. Even with these lacunae, this book opens discussion of an important, inexplicably neglected topic.

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