



A Conversation with Jan Lisa Huttner about
PENNY'S PICKS: 50 MOVIES BY WOMEN FILMMAKERS 2002-2011

“Since most of the movie critics are men, moviegoers are not getting the full story of what is available – and when a movie made by a woman is reviewed, moviegoers only get the male critic’s side of the story.”

Why did you write *Penny’s Picks: 50 Movies by Women Filmmakers 2002-2011*? Right now, there are almost no films by women filmmakers in the multiplex. Insofar as people notice this, they think the reason is that women don’t make enough movies. But that’s not true. Women make lots of movies, and some of them are really good. The problem is, most people don’t know about them.

Think about the age-old question: *If a tree falls in the forest but no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?* Sound is the property of a wave hitting an eardrum. A film is just like that wave – if there’s no one in the audience, it’s just like a wave that goes off into infinity unheard – gone – no sound! The fact is, women artists need women in the audience and women in the audience need women artists. *Otherwise, the stories are not ours – from our own point of view as women.*

So I want women (*and men*) to understand what they are missing when they don’t see any movies made by women, especially when they bypass a movie made by a woman filmmaker based solely on reviews written by men.

In *Penny’s Picks...*, I included many reviews of movies that underperformed at the box office – at least in part – because they were poorly reviewed by critics who are disproportionately male.

Is that why there aren’t more women filmmakers? The question is not “Why aren’t there more women filmmakers?” There are many women filmmakers and they are doing great work. The real question is: “Why aren’t more women—and men—seeking these films out?” There are great movies in the theaters, as well as on DVD and on cable. Movies that speak to women – and to men. The 50 reviews in *Penny’s Picks...*, they barely scratch the surface.

So, the movies you review in the book will appeal to men and women? In many cases, yes – once everyone understands that it is important for men to see films by women. We are all just people, and movies have a lot to teach us about each other. My mission is to persuade women (and men) to become smart movie consumers. When we choose films by women filmmakers, we put our money where our mouths are – and in Hollywood, those people in the backrooms who tabulate the dollars, they will notice!

Don’t men and women like different types of movies? I don’t believe in the Mars-Venus scenario. Men and women don’t live on separate planets; we all live here on Planet Earth. But I do think in each specific case, there will be a range of responses. Some women will like a specific film better than most men do, and vice versa, but there will always be some degree of overlap.

So why do men and women go to the movies? Most people go to the movies to be entertained. So the question isn’t why they go, the question is: *What’s entertainment?* Isn’t that why we have the phenomena of the so-called *prick flicks* (a term coined by Gloria Steinem) versus *chick flicks*?

Since most movie critics are men, women are marginalized, and half the population is treated as a “niche.” The result is that many women go to action movies just to be with “the guys”- their friends, boyfriends, or husbands—but then tell me they hated the movie. The biggest applause line I get when I do my presentations is when I say: “If I never see another knife fight, fist fight, sword fight, gun fight, or car chase again in my life, it will be too soon!” All the women in the audience know exactly what I mean, and they cheer me on.

Do you think all movies made by women will appeal to men? Of course not. But the myth is that none of the films made by women will appeal to men; the myth is that all films made by women are “Chick Flicks,” so guys won’t like them. Well, that just isn’t true. It’s important for men to see films by women, just as it’s important for women to see films by men. Movies have a lot to teach us about each other, and we can all be *Cinematic Tourists*—walking in the shoes of other people to see what life looks like from other points of view in different times and different places. That’s one of the great joys of going to the movies.

Do women like action films? Sure they do, but the action movies that succeed best with women also have interesting relationship components. Many men seem to enjoy intense “special effects” for their own sake, but most women look for stories that also have strong character arcs.

So the difference is in how men and women view a movie? My male colleagues love to talk about cinematography, but they rarely discuss visual design. For example, the Chicago Film Critics Association (CFCA)—a group I’ve belonged to for several years now—has an annual award for cinematography, but they don’t have comparable awards for set design or costume. But great directors rely on their designers to make the words in a screenplay come alive; they define characters by where they live and what they wear... So why not recognize these artists, too?

It’s not that I don’t care about cinematography as much as my male colleagues do—but my primary concern is always how the individual elements serve the narrative. If the narrative is weak, then no matter how great the cinematography is, the film itself is a failure.

Continued...



Jan Lisa Huttner

Can you provide an example of Male Critic bias? Last summer, one of my Chicago colleagues wrote a long review of Cary Fukunaga's new adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (screenplay by Moira Buffini). His review goes on for well over 1,000 words, almost all of them about Mr. Rochester – comparing all of the actors who have played Mr. Rochester in all of the prior adaptations. Only at the very end does he deign to spare a few words for Jane! But if you read *Penny's Picks*, you'll find a review by a critic who thinks that *Jane Eyre* is about Jane Eyre.

When did you begin to notice this bias? I can tell you exactly: On June 2, 2002, *The New York Times* published Dana Kennedy's article, *The Impatient Sisterhood*. That was Sunday before the Friday release of *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. The question Kennedy put forth was why had it taken Callie Khouri so long to helm a film after winning the Best Original Screenplay Oscar for *Thelma & Louise* in 1991? Kennedy wrote: "Are these women [including Khouri] suffering from discrimination? Many of them believe they are... But some women in Hollywood, like female politicians and corporate executives, choose to interrupt their careers to have children."

I went ballistic and immediately wrote a letter to the editor of *The New York Times*—and they published it:

"In your June 2 article describing the career frustrations of prominent women directors, author Dana Kennedy is very quick to offer the blame-the-victim explanation that they 'choose to interrupt their careers to have children.' Why not try looking closer to home? Who reviews films for *The New York Times*? Stephen Holden, Elvis Mitchell, and Tony Scott. Who reviews films for *The New Yorker*? David Denby and Anthony Lane. How many women are named as members on the New York Film Critics Circle website? Five out of 36 or 13.9%. When the National Society of Film Critics published its recent book, *The A List: 100 Essential Films*, how many women contributed? Four out of 41 or 9.8%. I'm willing to bet that if more major publications hired women film critics, more films by women (which, surprise, surprise, are often films about women) would get the kind of critical buzz that leads to box office clout."

And sure enough, when *Ya-Ya* opened that Friday, the [male] critics savaged it. I went to see it at a Friday afternoon screening, and the theatre was filled with women—not a single man in the room—and we all loved it. I know because I asked! But by the next week, in the whole city of Chicago, there was only one theatre still showing it...

In *Penny's Picks*... you wrote that when the NYT published your letter on June 30, it changed your life. Did it have any other impact? Who's to say? A few months later, the *Times* added a female film critic to its roster, but does that mean she—Manohla Dargis—should send me a personal thank you note?

But seriously, we need a greater diversity of movie reviews! What frustrates me is there are movies made by women that I'm sure will appeal to men as well as women. But since most of the movie critics are men, moviegoers are not getting different points of view on what's available; when a movie made by a woman is reviewed, moviegoers only get the male critic's side of the story.

However, as a woman, writing about films by women, how can you be sure your reviews also speak to men? My husband Rich and I discuss each film, and he always provides his input before I begin writing. That's the reason we decided to call our website *Films for Two: The Online Guide for Busy Couples*

(FF2). Every FF2 *Haiku* represents the viewpoints of both Jan and Rich. (We call them *Haikus*, like the little Japanese poems, because they are capsule summaries that describe the essence of each film.)

Is that why your logo on the *Films for Two* website is a heart? Yes. We launched FF2 on Valentine's Day in 2002 (ten years ago!), and speaking to both men **and** women has always been our primary focus.

We were – and still are – a hard-working "baby-boomer" couple, with great educations, and lots of family and social obligations. When we had "free time," we enjoyed watching movies together – and, like many couples, we often made our choices based on reviews. But choosing the movie was only one part of the experience. The second part was going somewhere afterwards to eat and argue. We began to notice that our opinions about the plot, the characters, the script, and even the costumes and cinematography often differed – and it was fun to hash all this out! At some point, people started asking **us** for recommendations, so one thing lead to another and here we are.

If the FF2 capsule summaries (FF2 Haikus) represent the views of both Jan and Rich, then who is the "Penny" of *Penny Picks*...? A "Pen" is a female swan. (The female is a pen; the male is a cob.) So I knew if I used the term "pen" for myself, then my blog could have the tag line

"Because the Pen is Mightier than the Sword." That thought really tickled my funny bone, so I decided to create the "Penny" blog (*The Hot Pink Pen*) as an adjunct to FF2.

"Penny" is my "feminist voice." Penny speaks with a voice that is not appropriate for FF2.

What made you look up the terms for male and female swans in the first place? In order to answer that question, I need to explain WITASWAN ("wit-uh-swan"), which stands for *Women in the Audience Supporting Women Artists Now*.

WITASWAN is a "movement," it's not an "organization." There are no dues, no Board of Directors, no committees, and no WITASWAN-specific fund raising drives. WITASWAN is a cause, an idea, a concept—a totally grassroots, internet-based "initiative" that began on that fateful Sunday (June 2, 2002) when I read Dana Kennedy's article in *The New York Times*.

Kennedy quoted a study from San Diego State University called "The Celluloid Ceiling," in which Professor Martha Lauzen reported that little had changed for women filmmakers in the years since she'd been counting. In 1987, women directed only three of the 100 highest-grossing films. By 2001, Lauzen reported that number had only risen to four. As I fixated on the quotes from Lauzen in Kennedy's article, my lifetime of feminist activism began to coalesce into a single point of focus.

What did you do? When I wrote that letter to *The New York Times*, I was letting off steam. I knew that thousands of people wrote letters to the *Times* every year. I never expected to see my words in print. But I also wrote that same day to Martha Lauzen. And when the editors published my letter, they helped me believe in myself, to realize that I had a voice – *and that people would listen*. One of the first things I did with my newly empowered voice was post an interview with Martha Lauzen on FF2—one of the longest, most comprehensive interviews anyone has ever done with her, even to this day.

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How did that lead to WITASWAN? Because of the dynamic women who belong to the Illinois division of the American Association of University Women! Knowing how fired up I was about "The Celluloid Ceiling," AAUW-IL Program Vice President Linda Henning Cohen asked me to present at a workshop at the 2003 Spring Convention. Forty-two people attended a showing of *A Jury of Her Peers* followed by a discussion with filmmaker Sally Heckel. As a result, AAUW-IL branches all around the state began inviting me to come speak. *A Jury of her Peers* was not commercially available at that time, but now it's available to all from *Women Make Movies* (www.wmm.com). That was our first victory!

In 2004, the AAUW-IL Board of Directors created an "incubator" for a new project and after much discussion, we decided to call it WITASWAN (Women in the Audience Supporting Women Artist Now!). And the project – WITASWAN – began to take on steam, with members pledging to see at least one film every month written and/or directed by a woman filmmaker.

Then, in 2005, I got a phone call from Martha Richards, executive director of WomenArts, and we began working together, too. In June of 2007, we announced our plan to celebrate "International SWAN Day" on the last Saturday of March (because March is Women's History Month). Since 2008, there have been more than 700 SWAN events in 21 countries – involving thousands of artists and audiences (large and small). Our goal is to show that women in the audience have untapped box office power.

And now there are SWAN Days all around the world? Yes! By 2011, WomenArts had provided collateral materials for more than 700 International SWAN Day events all around the world, including Argentina, Australia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Croatia, France, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Kenya, Philippines, Romania, Uruguay, Wales/U.K., and, of course, the USA.

Six hundred people celebrated "SWAN Day Kenya" in Nairobi last year – and they're already planning a bigger program this year in Mombasa! Last year in Bulgaria, they celebrated with a five-day theater festival, and in 2012 they're planning to showcase even more women. It's amazing how it's taking off. We started with one event in 2005 at the Chicago Cultural Center, but last year there were more than a dozen events in Metro Chicago alone.

It's been an exciting and gratifying journey that I've chronicled in the Appendix to *Penny's Picks...* as *10 Years in the Pond: From Lonely Ducklings to a Bevy of Swans*.

WITASWAN'S 10-year anniversary is only two years away. What goals do you hope to achieve for that celebration? My goal is to persuade more women to use their tremendous box office power – not only for themselves, but also for their children – for their sons as well as their daughters.

Why don't more women speak up? That's one of the reasons FF2 Media published *Penny's Picks...*, to let more women know they have a voice. Women can encourage the men in their lives to appreciate the stories told in films made by women.

Why is it so important to you that men go to films made by women? Women hold up half the sky! But very early on, boys are told that they are not supposed to be interested in "girl stuff." Girls are supposed to go to films about boys (like *Harry Potter*), but boys shouldn't go to films about girls (like *Kit Kittredge*). And

that attitude persists as we grow into young men and women, and crystallizes when we are adults. But why? *Kit Kittredge* is a wonderful film, a film for everyone! And so are all the films by women that I review in *Penny's Picks!*

Throughout this journey, who would you say is your greatest influence as a Film Critic? I read my colleagues' reviews sometimes, but I'm primarily influenced by my academic background as a Cognitive Psychologist, especially the work of Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman (*Thinking, Fast and Slow*), and more recently Shankar Vedantam's *The Hidden Brain*.

I'm passionate about film because film is the dominant art form of our time, and my writing reflects my background. Don't forget, my BA comes from St. John's Annapolis, so I read all the "Great Books" in college.

It's important for men to see films by women. We're all just people, and movies have a lot to teach us about each other.

No women? Oh, of course! Feminist scholars have been major influences, especially Stephanie Coontz (*The Way We Never Were*), Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*), and Deborah Tannen (*You Just Don't Understand*). I also love biographies of writer/activists like Susan Glaspell, Emma Goldman, and Margaret Sanger, and I've

done a great deal of work on Jane Addams since Illinois created "Jane Addams Day" a few years back (one of the only days named for a woman in the entire USA). Jane Addams is my role model!

What is the status of women filmmakers? While it was incredibly exciting to see Kathryn Bigelow receive her Oscar for directing *The Hurt Locker* two years back, the 2012 Oscar nominations tell the story. Receiving my final ballot from the Chicago Film Critics Association last month was heartbreaking. In the CFCA process (which is typical), male voters outnumber female voters by approximately 4 to 1. So it's no wonder that there are NO women in the CFCA's Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Most Promising Filmmaker categories, and only one woman is nominated in the Best Adapted Screenplay category (nominated – surprise, surprise – for a film that has almost no female characters).

It's just very ironic because Oscar Night is targeted to women. (Just watch all the commercials that night clearly marketing products to women.) And yet, almost none of the 2012 contenders will be movies by or about women. *Guess I'll have to write another book about that!*



Publisher: FF2 Media
Date: 1st edition, December 2011
Language: English
ISBN: 978-0615564890
Available NOW at amazon.com

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