

Rot in Hell, Harvey Weinstein

‘She Said’ explores how male and female collaborators helped Hollywood’s ‘warthog from hell’



by Phyllis Chesler

Harvey Weinstein is back in the headlines. Last week, the disgraced Hollywood producer was sentenced to 16 years in prison for a rape conviction in Los Angeles, adding to the 23-year-term he received in New York in 2020. The news came four months after the release of [She Said](#), the movie based on the articles and subsequently the [book](#), by the two *New York Times* reporters who exposed Harvey Weinstein’s long history of sexual misconduct against women.

The film received broad critical acclaim; was named one of the best films of 2022 by the American Film Institute; the public who viewed it, at least based on its score at Rotten Tomatoes, loved it. And yet, it has been a box office flop—grossing only \$13 million against a production budget of \$32 million.

What, exactly, is so disinteresting or even “boring” about such a sensational, important story? Do most people prefer to look away, pass on by, when women are victimized—or, in this case, when women are the heroes of the story and when the victims obtain even a smidgen of justice? The film exposed women collaborators. Is this what viewers did not want to acknowledge?

The film, starring Carey Mulligan (as Megan Twohey) and Zoe Kazan (as Jodi Kantor), pulled me right in and kept me riveted to my seat. It is a powerful indictment of male sexual violence and a tribute to Twohey and Kantor, who labored long and hard to bring one “monster” to justice.

Slowly, inevitably, the film forced me—no, it allowed me—to remember my own experiences of sexual harassment as a girl and as a young woman, and my one-time experience of being [raped by my employer](#) at the United Nations. The culture of protecting male sexual entitlement ruled there, as in Hollywood. What I hadn’t been prepared for was the crucial role that women play in covering up such allegations.

Since I have to live with myself, I [reread](#) the [series](#) of [2017 articles](#) that Kantor and Twohey published, as well as those by Ronan Farrow in *The [New Yorker](#)*; and the extensive reporting [in The Guardian](#) about lawyer Lisa Bloom, who served as Weinstein’s “legal adviser.” I also watched *All the President’s Men*, which fictionalized another dramatic journalistic duo—that of Carl Bernstein and Robert Woodward, who broke the Watergate scandal at *The Washington Post* and brought down a presidency.

In my view, Twohey, Kantor, and Farrow covered a much larger story than that of one American political party's corruption and Nixon's resignation.

The monster Weinstein was a Hollywood king. His global reach and power equaled—or probably surpassed—that of the president of any one country. He was pampered like a king; he had a female assistant to put him to bed, wake him up, and get him into his morning shower.

Weinstein's films have earned more than 300 Oscar nominations, and, according to Ronan Farrow, he "has been [thanked](#) more than anyone else in movie history, ranking just after Steven Spielberg and right before God."

And rightly so. Miramax and the Weinstein Company produced or distributed films that I—and just about everyone else—really loved. Political films, romantic films, mystical films, murder mysteries, anti-Holocaust films, fairy tales, adventure films, musicals—everything. Here are some of my own favorites, and there are so many.

The Thin Blue Line (1998), *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1990), *Cinema Paradiso* (1990), *Nasty Girl* (1990), *Like Water for Chocolate* (1993), *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), *Il Postino* (1995), *The English Patient* (1996), *Her Majesty, Mrs. Brown* (1997), *A Price Above Rubies* (1998), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), *Comedian Harmonists* (1999), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), *Chocolat* (2001), *Kate & Leopold* (2001), *The Four Feathers* (2002), *Frida* (2002), *Master & Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003), *The Aviator* (2004), *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and *The King's Speech* (2010).

Can you imagine the power he wielded in the Dream Factory of the world?

Our intrepid *New York Times* journalists were treated as the whistleblowers they truly were. In the film version they

received packages of feces, threats, and terrifying phone calls. Also in the film, Weinstein's victims were threatened in a different way. If they "talked," Weinstein's minions would plant articles which defamed them in the media and which would effectively destroy their credibility and their chances of future work.

Weinstein's MO consisted of having women employees (known as "honeypots") accompany an unsuspecting, young, promising actress to see him, ostensibly on business, presumably in an office, on a film set, in a restaurant, or in a hotel lobby. Weinstein would dismiss the female employee and then, like a wild animal, physically pounce upon the woman, who was at least a foot shorter and 100 pounds lighter. According to accounts, Weinstein was ferocious, even more so if his prey was terrified. He never stopped. Protests, screams of "no, no, no," hysterics, tears, or even fighting back did not work; it only drove him on. He would either straddle his victim and masturbate on her, or he'd perform unwanted oral sex on her or force her to perform fellatio on him. Afterwards, he would act as if nothing had happened.

One of the earliest accusers, actress Rose McGowan, saw Weinstein as "a warthog from hell ... a terrifying looking" man. She [said](#) that he performed "forced oral sex" on her and that "Weinstein has done diabolical things in the name of being able to stick his face between a woman's legs and literally eat their essence. It's chilling and it's real."

Many view the systematic destruction of innocence, the soul-murder of children and young women bright with promise, as the work of pure [evil](#). After his assaults, many of Weinstein's victims suffered shame and guilt. Some could never enjoy oral sex again; some even attempted suicide. Some abandoned their Hollywood dreams.

Apparently, Weinstein's appetite for retaliation knew no bounds. He had daily, volcanic attacks of rage. He was a

bully. Everyone was afraid of him, but everyone was on, or wanted to be on, his payroll.

Although I'm a psychologist, Weinstein is almost impossible to "diagnose." He fits no exact profile. Is he a rapist? Stranger rapes take place between people unknown to each other, and rapist and victim rarely ever see each other again. More often, however, rapists prey upon girls and women within their own families and neighborhoods. Like Weinstein, they have social infrastructures (often family) that protect them, deny their victims' allegations and sometimes even ostracize their accusers. Weinstein, however, did not prey upon his female relatives.

He is a unique kind of predator, one who combines physical strength, an enormous sexual appetite, rage, and psychological arrogance—all protected by the legal and economic power that he wielded. He reminds me of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, once the director of the International Monetary Fund, who [raped](#) a hotel maid in New York City. (A rather good film was made about it. Strauss-Kahn was eventually brought down, but in his native France, not in New York. The poor maid was not a perfect enough witness.)

Like Strauss-Kahn, Weinstein had a huge infrastructure of enablers, protectors and bystanders, including a number of women—so many Ghislaine Maxwells who were in no immediate danger themselves but who were willing to betray other women for money, status, and the high life. I was pained to read that lawyer Lisa Bloom actually jockeyed to advise Weinstein, based on her experience representing sexual abuse victims. Apparently, Bloom [thought](#) it would be a "great opportunity to work with the film producer who the Obamas love," also citing "Weinstein's friendships with Hillary Clinton, Michael Moore, and Gloria Steinem." (Bloom has since [apologized](#) for her actions.)

Very few rapes are ever prosecuted and of those that are, even

fewer rapists are convicted. Weinstein is now rotting in jail for 39 years thanks in large part to the investigative work of Twohey and Kantor. But do we really think anything has changed simply because some hotshot guys—Roger Ailes, Bill Cosby, Jeffrey Epstein, Matt Lauer, Bill O'Reilly, and the late conductor, James Levine—were finally taken down a peg?

It has not. While only a tiny fraction of men ever commit rape or sexual assault, the worst men still behave as if the entire world is their personal brothel. They leer, wolf-whistle, make sexualized comments, and demean and violate their female employees, whether through unwanted touching, exposure to pornography, or nonstop invitations to go out drinking or visit a strip club or hotel.

Many men in positions of power still believe that women owe them sex in return for the right to work. And we naturally hear less about such incidents in industries without the glamor and power of Hollywood—consider, for instance, the [widespread sexual abuse](#) of female prison inmates.

I stand with the many thousands of women around the world who have come forward to name their sexual harassers and rapists.

I have been sexually harassed and propositioned as a teenager, a college and graduate student, and as an employee, by strangers on the street, and by neighbors, professors, employers, and colleagues. This stuff is par for the course in most young women's lives. But you know what else? #MeToo, at the U.N.

Days after I signed my employment contract, my employer told me that he'd fallen in love with me and that I must become his "mistress." I refused. One night soon thereafter, he came to my apartment at midnight and raped me.

I was furious, humiliated, shamed. I vowed that his violence would not drive me away. I did not want to abandon the project, an international feminist conference, one that I

alone had envisioned. And—I needed the salary. I managed never to be alone with him again—not ever. Things went south rather swiftly.

Suddenly, the color of my skin, my American nationality, my religion (Jewish), my Zionist passion, perhaps even my feminism, were treated disdainfully by all his hand-selected committee members.

What happened afterward educated me about the crucial role that women play in covering up allegations of incest, sexual harassment, and rape both at home, on the street, and in the office. As I previously wrote for [Tablet](#) and in my book, [A Politically Incorrect Feminist](#): “Two prominent feminist leaders chose U.N.-related privileges over principled solidarity with me, the victim. Since my rapist had diplomatic immunity, I’d asked them to stand with me and confront him privately, so this rapist ‘would not go to his grave thinking he could divide the likes of us.’ They failed to do so. They covered up their collaboration by treating me as a ‘whistle-blower’ and casting doubt on what I said.”

In the end, this experience led to my book *Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman*, and to the hundreds of articles I wrote thereafter about the rapes and gang rapes of women in Bosnia, Iran, India, Rwanda, and Sudan, something I termed “gender-cleansing.”

The film *She Said* reawakened all these painful memories. I am glad that the #MeToo movement was ignited in the 21st century, first by Tarana Burke in 2006 and then again by Hollywood actresses in 2017. Back in the day, second wave [feminists](#) also broke the silence about [rape](#) and [sexual harassment](#), but our books were not assigned reading and the [history of our activism](#) and our speak-outs [was not taught](#). Like most feminist knowledge, it simply disappeared, only to await rediscovery.

We are in the midst of a worldwide scandal on this subject,

one that feminists pioneered long ago. It will subside. Somehow, I doubt that incest perpetrators, sexual harassers, serial rapists, sex addicts, pimps, and johns will be disappearing anytime soon.

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