



Sleepless in Hollywood: Tales from the New Abnormal in the Movie Business

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The veteran producer and author of the bestseller *Hello, He Lied* takes a witty and critical look at the new Hollywood.

Over the past decade, producer Lynda Obst gradually realized she was working in a Hollywood that was undergoing a drastic transformation. The industry where everything had once been familiar to her was suddenly disturbingly strange.

Combining her own industry experience and interviews with the brightest minds in the business, Obst explains what has stalled the vast moviemaking machine. The calamitous DVD collapse helped usher in what she calls the New Abnormal (because Hollywood was never normal to begin with), where studios are now heavily dependent on foreign markets for profit, a situation which directly impacts the kind of entertainment we get to see. Can comedy survive if they don't get our jokes in Seoul or allow them in China? Why are studios making fewer movies than ever—and why are they bigger, more expensive and nearly always sequels or recycled ideas?

Obst writes with affection, regret, humor and hope, and her behind-the-scenes vantage point allows her to explore what has changed in Hollywood like no one else has. This candid, insightful account explains what has happened to the movie business and explores whether it'll ever return to making the movies we love—the classics that make us laugh or cry, or that we just can't stop talking about.

Sleepless in Hollywood: Tales from the New Abnormal in the Movie Business Details

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From Reader Review Sleepless in Hollywood: Tales from the New Abnormal in the Movie Business for online ebook

Korey says

I have a few nitpicks with this book: the chapter on the 2007-2008 writer's strike is lazy (half of it is reprinted comments from a blog) and the concluding chapter throws in a bit of unsourced optimism totally out of step with the rest of the narrative, but on the whole this book is insightful, timely and important. This is a great succinct summary of how the movie business operates now and how it got to be this way. It is a sobering, somewhat depressing read as Obst chronicles how the collapse of the DVD market and the explosive growth of the international market (particularly China and Russia) incentivize studios to produce an endless glut of expensive action driven franchise films at the expense of other types of films.

There is only room in the contemporary film marketplace for what Obst calls tentpoles (blockbuster franchises like Iron Man, Spider-Man, Transformers etc based on established properties) or tadpoles (microbudget indie films). One off dramas, historical pictures, comedy that relies on verbal wit rather than slapstick, these films are endangered in this current marketplace, as is any film that is not an adaptation, sequel or reboot of an existing moneymaker.

The writing style is occasionally simplistic and overly colloquial but the content of the book is strong enough to overcome these sporadic minor flaws in presentation and much of the book is both substantive and engaging.

I recommend this book highly to anyone who has an interest in film. Obst gathers a lot of information and presents it in a largely compelling fashion. Also, she does not use the book as an excuse to brag or puff herself up, which is refreshing. When discussing her own career she does not shy away from admitting fault.

Scott Porch says

Film producer Lynda Obst's career has had more twists and turns than a big-budget action movie -- which is not the sort of movie she makes. (Not yet anyway, but more on that later.)

Obst started her career as associate producer on Flashdance and made a film every year or two from the early 1990s through the early 2000s -- One Fine Day with George Clooney and Michelle Pfeiffer, Hope Floats with Sandra Bullock, Contact with Jodie Foster, and iconic romantic comedy Sleepless in Seattle with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan.

In 2001, Paramount Pictures greenlit her rom-com How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days starring Kate Hudson and Matthew McConaughey. It opened No. 1 at the box office in February 2003, was Paramount's second-highest grossing movie that year, and is one of the 25 highest-grossing romantic comedies of all time.

Obst continued to read scripts and develop budgets for the kinds of films she had always made --- smart, character-driven, medium-budget comedies and dramas. A year after How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days, though, Paramount had not greenlit her next film.

"Suddenly, I was getting blank stares when I asked to go to hire directors," Obst said in our recent interview. "My son (talent manager Oly Obst), who is incredibly smart, said to me, 'Mom, trying to get a movie made

because it's good is so 2003."

By the late 2000s, the industry was in a full-on reboot: DVD sales dropped by more than half from 2007 to 2010 as consumers turned to much-less-profitable streaming services like Netflix. Studios unloaded many production deals in the wake of the 2007 writers' strike and started making fewer films.

In her new book, *Sleepless in Hollywood: Tales from the New Abnormal in the Movie Business* (Simon & Schuster), Obst explains the revolution through interviews with studio executives, producers, writers, etc. The book grew out of her own search for answers.

"I set off to figure out what the hell was going on because I couldn't figure it out myself," Obst said. "I didn't understand why I wasn't able to get the same kinds of movies made that I was able to get made the first half of my career."

The book is both an outstanding work of reporting about how Hollywood evolved from a film-driven American industry to a brand-driven global enterprise and a personal account of how those changes drove Obst's film career from studio to studio, and from film to television and back.

Obst is Thriving in the 'New Abnormal.'

Nothing has ever been normal in Hollywood, Obst says. She calls the days before the massive upheaval the "Old Abnormal" and the period since then the "New Abnormal." Obst recovered -- as did Hollywood -- and is thriving in the New Abnormal. She has more projects in pre-production and production than at any other time in her career and in all three areas where Hollywood is trending: tentpoles (big-budget films), tadpoles (small-budget indie films), and television.

Obst's just-announced tentpole film is the sci-fi epic *Interstellar*, which she will co-produce with director Christopher Nolan and writer Jonathan Nolan for a November 2014 release. The film will star Anne Hathaway, Jessica Chastain, Michael Caine, and Matthew McConaughey, who Obst worked with on both *Contact* and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*.

"We're all in a very happy cone of silence about *Interstellar*," Obst said, declining to elaborate on the film's premise or other tidbits.

For her tadpole film, Obst has financing, a script, a director, and is in casting for *How to Get a Guy in 10 Days*, an indie kind-of-sort-of sequel to *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*. The hottest property a producer can own, Obst says, is a franchise with pre-awareness.

"We're trying to take the notion of preawareness" -- the built-in buzz that a well-known brand brings to the table -- "of *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*' fans and say, this is something like that. It's not exactly that," Obst said. "But it's a movie in that vein. It's not a reboot, it's not a sequel, but it's a movie in that tradition."

In television, Obst is an executive producer on *Hot in Cleveland* -- the popular TV Land series now in its fourth season was Obst's idea -- and has a series in production called *Helix* that will air this winter on Syfy.

Romantic comedies are (mostly) out.

American romantic comedies lost favor with the major studios because they don't have blockbuster potential at home and don't sell as well in places like China and India. In the last two years, the only romantic comedy to gross more than \$100 million at the U.S. box office was *Silver Lining Playbook* -- and much of that was due to Oscar buzz and a Best Actress win by Jennifer Lawrence.

"There are cultural nuances that don't travel. Broad comedies play because falling on a banana peel is funny in every culture, but nuance -- cultural nuance, or wit -- are peculiarities. They don't travel. So-called "writing" -- wit and nuance -- doesn't travel," Obst said.

"Broad comedy travels, which is why you saw Hangover play [internationally], which is why you saw Horrible Bosses play to a certain extent, and why you saw Bridesmaids surprise everybody and play so well."

That has pushed romantic comedies into smaller-budget indie productions like Friends with Kids, which Jennifer's Westfeldt and John Hamm made for less than \$10 million, and (500) Days of Summer, which had a budget of \$7.5 million.

Blockbuster franchise films are in.

There are new rules to making a box-office hit in Hollywood, and they aren't complicated: You need a franchise, you need pre-awareness, and you need international appeal. And if -- if, if, if, if -- you pick the right project, you join the billion-dollar club.

Notice what wasn't in those rules: making a good movie. Decent reviews are optional. Transformers: Dark of the Moon and Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest each grossed more than \$1 billion worldwide despite generally bad reviews.

In 2012, Walt Disney Pictures made a big bet on John Carter -- which, you may not know, was based on the John Carter of Mars series of books that Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote roughly a century ago -- and it lost \$200 million. It had no fan base, no bankable stars, and no social-media buzz. It was the biggest flop in box office history.

"I think the problem was that it wasn't an IP (intellectual property) worthy of being made," Obst said. "I don't think science geeks were interested in it, and I don't think fantasy geeks were interested in it. I'm a science geek; I didn't want to go."

Michelle L says

Unfortunately the book was written so badly that I suspect only Obst's friends and no disinterested editors were consulted. I did learn quite a bit about the systemic changes for the worse in Hollywood - i.e., the business -- but it was a struggle and a half. At least I now (mostly) know that it hasn't been some dreadful personal elitism that led me to avoid the movie theater these last few years.

Gail Carriger says

A little bit like Heads In Beds only for the Hollywood Movie industry. Very absorbing if you want to know why Hollywood is putting out the same old tent poll blockbusters over and over again. Which I do, because this behavior has driven me away from the movie theater.

Todd says

I wish I could rate this book more highly -- the first section, about how Hollywood now caters to the Chinese and Russian markets (which is one reason we see so much 3D -- they love it), was genuinely fascinating. But after awhile Obst turns once too often to her pals, who are always the greatest and smartest in classic Hollywood back-slapping fashion, and her own journey doesn't seem all that interesting. Disappointing.

Karen says

Here's the blurb from the publisher:

The veteran producer and author of the bestseller *Hello, He Lied* takes a witty and critical look at the new Hollywood.

Over the past decade, producer Lynda Obst gradually realized she was working in a Hollywood that was undergoing a drastic transformation. The industry where everything had once been familiar to her was suddenly disturbingly strange.

Obst writes with affection, regret, humor and hope, and her behind-the-scenes vantage point allows her to explore what has changed in Hollywood like no one else has. This candid, insightful account explains what has happened to the movie business and explores whether it'll ever return to making the movies we love—the classics that make us laugh or cry, or that we just can't stop talking about. Combining her own industry experience and interviews with the brightest minds in the business, Obst explains what has stalled the vast moviemaking machine. The calamitous DVD collapse helped usher in what she calls the New Abnormal (because Hollywood was never normal to begin with), where studios are now heavily dependent on foreign markets for profit, a situation which directly impacts the kind of entertainment we get to see. Can comedy survive if they don't get our jokes in Seoul or allow them in China? Why are studios making fewer movies than ever—and why are they bigger, more expensive and nearly always sequels or recycled ideas?

My thoughts: If you've ever found yourself scratching your head in confusion, about why in the world "Hollywood" does anything...then THIS is the book for you! I've loved books and movies since...forever, and I want to thank Lynda Obst for writing *Sleepless in Hollywood* just for me.

Like a lot of people, I follow movies, I track trends in films. I go to small film festivals, I see movies people have never heard of. Why? Because I love old and new Hollywood, and I love the industry. Let me be honest, I'm a movie junkie. I've spent years slamming my head onto hard surfaces trying to understand why some movies just never happen, why some are made and clearly shouldn't have been and have wondered why on earth "they" are marketing tent pole films to China and Russia? really? yeah, go figure.

After reading *Sleepless in Hollywood*, I "get it!" I really understand. Obst, drawing on her years of producing and making properties happen, has written an honest, easily understood, fascinatingly hypnotic look at the "behind the scenes" grit that goes into making movies. I read this in about two days, and I have a full time job, so that means I was reading at red lights, sitting in traffic and waiting for my nails to dry at the nail place.

Not in the film business? No matter. If you watch TV, see movies once a week or once a year, take the kids to the newest animated 3-D monster fest on the weekend, then this book is for you! Haven't seen a movie since talkies were the new trend? Just realized movies are now in color? This book is for you, you have a lot of catching up to do.

OK, seriously, this is a well written, fact based, interesting and engaging book. Obst clearly knows her own business, and she shares her business with us, the wanna-bees, the fans and the admirers of the art of film making. She tells insider stories, but it's never gossipy, it's smart, informative and entertaining.

Just read it, you'll thank me. You'll thank Lynda Obst for writing it, and the next time you're sitting at a table outside at the Chateau Marmont having a drink, you'll actually understand what they are saying at the table next to you! IMAGINE!

4 1/2 out of 5 big stars!!

I'm going to buy this with my hard earned pennies and add it to my bookshelf library at home!

** This e-galley was provided to me by the publisher through Edelweiss.abovethetreeline.com in exchange for a fair and honest review.

Trike says

This book is about as deep as a puddle. The only substance to be had comes from interviews with industry professionals. It makes me long for a book on this topic done by a proper journalist.

Obst seems to go out of her way to insult and belittle every group on the planet. Her targets are Midwesterners, Chinese, screenwriters, Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, Russians, kids, senior citizens, people who watch TV... the list is endless. If you're a human being, at some point Obst makes an off-handed derogatory remark about you. I assume she's trying to be witty (she fails) or snarky (she doesn't understand that at all). The only people who don't get this treatment are her personal friends.

The hook about "The New Abnormal" doesn't really hold up to scrutiny. The movie industry has been through this exact sort of sea change before, back when TV first gained ascendancy and started eating cinema's lunch in the 1950s and then again when movie attendance dropped off in the early 1970s. There's a lot of substance one can delve into with these historical parallels, but Obst is concerned about her own life. She strikes me as a teenager discovering love for the first time and then going through a bad break-up, thinking no one else in the history of mankind has ever gone through something like this.

I'd give it one star, but there are a couple of interviews worth checking out. The substance of this book could be condensed down to a New Yorker Magazine article, though.

Michael Finnegan says

Ten pages of useful information hidden among 250 pages of self-serving handjobberry. I want to punch this book in the face.

Richard says

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Yup, that's why there's nothing (moviewise) to watch on cable...and that's why there's everything (serieswise) to watch on cable...and sometimes a very big surprise in network tv...but, then, books always were and are the best...

-

Maura says

A quick and very interesting book for anyone who is legitimately curious about why Hollywood only seems to be interested in franchises and reboots these days. Here's a quick tl:dr

1) Movie Execs were expecting DVDs to be way more lucrative when they turned out to be. They were not counting on piracy.

2) American's aren't going to the actual movies as much anymore. We would all rather stay home and watch Netflix.

3) You know who does go to the movies though? Russia and China. The decline of communism has opened up huge populations of people who have never had a chance to see decadent American popcorn movies before and they f*ing love them. The bigger, louder, and CG explosion the better.

This adds up to mean that the foreign market that used to account for 20 percent of their profits now accounts for 70 percent. So instead of saying "the Chinese don't like this kind of movie so we won't bother trying to sell it over there" execs now say "The Chinese don't like this kind of movie so we're not going to bother making it."

You can see how this creates a bit of a vicious cycle, where studios focus on more "tentpoles", what they call the huge big budget action franchises that prop up their little circus. American audiences exclaim "we've seen this nonsense before! We're sick of the rehashing!" and stay home. Foreign audiences exclaim "We've never seen anything like this! Keep it coming!" And round and round it goes.

The author says she doesn't see an end in sight, though she does also say that China resents having to import it's effects heavy movies from America and is trying to catch up and make it's own action films. So maybe Hollywood will have to start trying to interest domestic audiences again someday? A silver lining to all of this, which the book leaves us with, is the exodus of so much great writing and acting talent to TV. As movies get stupider and more predictable, TV gets smarter and more original. (Since I've always liked character driven TV more than plot driven movies anyway, this seems like a net gain.)

The author is someone who worked as a producer for decades and she gives you an insider's view of how the shift happened and what it was like to live through it. The style was a little too chatty for my taste; the author doesn't exactly name drop but does introduce us to a lot of her friends and co-workers who we do not necessarily need to meet. But some readers will enjoy that; there were some times when the author made me nostalgic for Hollywood before the shift, even though this was a Hollywood I only knew from The Animaniacs (remember that time when they sang a whole song about how to understand the headlines of Variety? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egpWC...>) and which had always sounded shallow and seedy enough before.

Tom says

Curious as to why films these days are a never-ending parade of sequels and remakes, mostly featuring costumed superheroes? Lynda Obst, a veteran Hollywood executive producer, is too. She lived through the seismic shift that happened in the industry around '07-08. Here she tracks down studio heads, big name producers and marketing execs to get their take on what happened.

Their answers are illuminating: the contraction of the DVD market has taken a lot of money off the table that filmmakers used to count on; meanwhile, the massive growth of international markets has created a gold rush.

Slightly less illuminating, but still interesting, is Obst's inside baseball account of her own adventures in the film (and now, the TV) industry over the last decade. She also recounts a lot of the dramatic '08 writer's strike, and what came after.

The whole book is somewhat haphazard and feels a bit rushed and disorganized, but the information is very timely. If you want an inside look at what ails Hollywood today, this is probably your best bet.

Angela says

This is not by any means a good book. It meanders and is in desperate need of an editor. That said, it provides an interesting view into an industry and way of life; in some ways its biases are a feature not a bug. It's short enough that it was worth the read.

Kristin Dow says

A must read for any aspiring screenwriter! Add it to your shelf!

Demystifies Hollywood's obsession with superheroes. Still don't like them, but now understand them. As franchise fatigue seems to be growing, let's hope more female-driven vehicles have a chance to shine, or at least find an outlet to reach their audience.

I'm a junkie for Hollywood stories and power plays so it satisfies in that respect as well. Devoured this book and learned a lot from it.

Matt says

Ever since Star Trek Into Darkness, I've decided I never want to see a new movie again. A calculated piece of brand awareness, it lacked any meaning or purpose. I have seen plenty of blockbuster, comic-book, franchise all-action movies before and enjoyed many of them, but until Star Trek Into Darkness, I had never seen anything that so blatantly made me feel like a dollar sign. Anyway, I know I'm not the only one who has felt a loss of interest in movies. Obst helps explain what happened to Hollywood studios. In the 2000s DVD revenue petered out and international box-office revenue blew up. Pitch meetings, where new ideas were worked out between producers and writers, were lost, and instead marketing departments now lead development. Everything now is about "preawareness" and franchises—things that can be easily sold across languages and cultures.

Obst's text is anecdotal and conversational. She goes on personal tangents, and drops in puzzling, non-essential details. She says things like, "She looks like a cameo in a locket but acts like a turbocharged Ferrari." (Which is so nonsensical that in a different context it could be mistaken for a brilliant Bob Dylan line.) She lays too much blame on the 2007 WGA strike for jump-starting everything. But this is a first-hand, honest observation from someone whose entire world shifted beneath her feet in a period of less than a decade. She isn't just lamenting a lost-past, and she doesn't entirely hold herself blameless. Obst is as funny and sincere as new movies are calculated and heartless.

Marla says

I was enjoying this book, despite its repetitions, until the author made a rude remark about people from Iowa. Why do Hollywood types think all Midwesterners are provincial? I wonder if Obst understands what the Iowa Writers' Workshop is and does, for example. Honestly. I don't even live there any more and it annoys me.
