

Ms. Nina King, editor
Book World
The Washington Post
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Dear Ms. King,

For Robert Sklar's teaching of cinema studies at NYU and and more reviews he writes like that about Darryl Zanuck he needs to brush up a bit ^{on} about what ended that well-intendd but misdirected Senate investigation of Hollywood ^e as allegedly intending to get us in World War II. In fact Zanuck had little to do with bringing ^{it} what had turned into a propoganda investigation to an end than you did. And much less than I did.

Senator Gerald Nye, a Republican, of North Dakota, ran that investigation. He had conducted the important and often sensational investigation of the munitions industry. (For which my wife was assista~~nt~~ editor.) Nye was a friendly, sincere and conscientious man. I knew him. He let me use his offi~~ce~~ safe when I was editor of the Senate Civil Liberties Committee (1936-9). We had no safe.

When I was in New York City, after returning to writing, a friend in the Newspaper Guild office took me to the press club. He introduced me to ^a the man who was doing publicity for the coming Edward G. Robinson movie, "Confessions of a Nazi Spy," Wellington Roe. Roe asked for my ~~to~~ help with Washington promotions and I arranged a super-spectacular one for him.

Nye's then administrative assistant, ^(right) Spike Mauvius, and I had bent elbows often en^ough afternoons in the Carroll Arms bar. Nye had introduced a bill to prohibit the wearing of uniforms by groups like the one he really aimed at, the pro-Hitler German -American Bund. I suggested to ~~me~~ Spike that the movie would help get that bill passed if Nye sponsored a preview of it in Washington. He and Nye agreed and they arranged for that movie to preview, to an invited audience only, in the ^e Department of Labor auditorium.

This was some time before the Senate movie investigation.

In those years I also knew people on Warner Brothers Washington staff,

particularly Frank La Falce (right), who headed public relations. His office was on the top floor of the Earle building. I brought him and Mauvius together ^{to arrange} for that preview for top government and other important people.

(Paul Porter, who had been an FCC commissioner, had his law office on that floor and near Frank's. I think he handled the Warner law work in Washington then. I knew him. Later he was one of my lawyers. *He was a founding partner of Arnold and Porter.*) Nye was the big wheel in the Senate movie investigation. He and Spike by then had forgotten about their part in promoting that Robinson movie. In fact, with Harry Warner on the stand, Nye went after him with vigor over the alleged war incitation of that very movie, "Confessions of a Nazi Spy." When Warner had so little to say in response, after that day's hearing I went to Frank's office and reminded him. He, too, had forgotten! He rushed out to get to Warner and his staff and lawyers in particular to tell them this story. Before the next day's hearing Warner had it firmly in mind.

He then recounted to the Senate and to the country how Nye had sponsored the very movie he now claimed was aimed at getting us into the war!

and that was the end of that investigation, as your morgue will show, I am sure, if there is access to those years of it.

It was not Zanuck, who may have testified exactly as Sklar says. It was Nye's record that did Nye's investigation in, ended it, as your morgue will also show, I am confident.

My recollection is not clear on one aspect but I believe that the movie investigation was developing anti-Semitic overtones.

My initial interest was anti-Hitler and that is why I arranged for that unusual and very effective promotion.

Feel free to forward this to Sklar. If you would like to use any of it, feel free to cut and edit. Please tell Sklar that if he wants to talk to me more about that to do it before suppertime, by which time, feeble as I now am at 84 and in impaired health, I'm usually abed. Sincerely, Harold Weisberg

Harold Weisberg

Last of The Moguls

**TWENTIETH CENTURY'S FOX
Darryl F. Zanuck and the
Culture of Hollywood**

By George F. Custen
BasicBooks, 435 pp. \$27.50

By Robert Sklar

IN THE dog days of August 1941, a few months before Pearl Harbor, two isolationist senators accused Hollywood of making propaganda movies advocating U.S. intervention in the European war. For-eigners ran the movie studios, they charged,

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Darryl F. Zanuck

and were pursuing their own interests rather than the nation's.

Called to testify before the Senate Interstate Commerce Committee, several movie moguls, indeed foreign-born, had a hard

time defending themselves. Then came Darryl F. Zanuck, head of production at Twentieth Century-Fox. Birthplace? Wahoo, Neb. Background? The Methodist church. Hollywood was doing a top-notch job of selling the

American way of life, he proclaimed. After Zanuck spoke, the isolationists found nothing more to say about the movies.

This episode doesn't make it into George F. Custen's new biography of the producer. Although a telling footnote in the nation's history, it's clearly incidental to the author's purpose of rehabilitating the reputation of a Hollywood figure whose greatness he regards as insufficiently appreciated. Custen's admiration for Zanuck is refreshing. It not only violates the rules of present-day biography, which require that the mighty be brought down a few pegs. It also flies in the face of popular Hollywood history.

In the standard version (much like the isolationist senators'), uncouth, uneducated Eastern European Jews operated the movie studios, with one exception—the uncouth, uneducated Midwestern Protestant Zanuck. A slightly more elevated account credits Zanuck with being a crass also-ran among the boy-wonder producers of Hollywood's 1930s golden age, trailing behind the ethereal genius Irving Thalberg and the brilliant dynamo David O. Selznick.

If you're looking for schooling and manners, Custen im—Continued on page 12 3

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Darryl Zanuck

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plies, don't cast your eyes on Hollywood. He's more interested in the lurid, pulp-fictional world of urban mass culture that, in his view, lay at the heart of Zanuck's movie-making knack.

How did a Nebraska boy connect with urban mass culture? Well, for one thing, Zanuck (1902-79) didn't stay long in Wahoo. From age 7 he spent most of his youth in Glendale, Calif., hard by Hollywood. Not yet 15, he lied about his age to enlist in the Army and managed to get shipped overseas during World War I. A teen-age veteran, he began writing promotional copy and sensationalistic fiction, mostly self-published. This background landed him in the Warner Bros. story department, where he furiously scripted scenarios under multiple pseudonyms. He turned Rin Tin Tin into a star and in the late 1920s, still a twentysomething, was appointed executive in charge of production.

Zanuck helped carry Warner Bros. into the sound era and through the first dark years of the Great Depression. His metier was the story conference. Analyzing a script with its writers, he would dramatically act out scenes while sharpening the plot line, punching up character traits, highlighting the audience's "rooting interest," as a stenographer took down every word for the file. Later, as head of Fox, he built a stable of trusted subordinates, including writers Lamar Trotti, Nunnally Johnson and Philip Dunne, and direc-

tor John Ford, who were responsible for the classics "Young Mr. Lincoln" (1939), "The Grapes of Wrath" (1940), and Zanuck's first Academy Award best picture, "How Green Was My Valley" (1941).

Zanuck's reputation began to slip in the 1950s as the studio system crumbled before television's onslaught. In 1956 he abruptly quit the Fox helm, left his wife, moved to Europe, and took up with starlets. There was one more stint as Fox president, with his son Richard as production head, during the disastrous (for the movie industry) 1960s. In his last years he became a living relic of a vanishing breed, the moguls, whom a later era had come to view as cigar-chomping, egomaniacal buffoons.

How does one make the case for a mogul's greatness? One of Custen's strategies is to emphasize the wider cultural significance of the producer's output. He credits Zanuck with shaping the famous Warner Bros. gangster films of the early 1930s, then shifting at Fox later in the decade to historical and nostalgia themes—both styles, he suggests, emblematic, indeed formative, of larger trends.

Another, even more insistent, approach is to claim Zanuck as the major creative figure on the important works with which he was associated. No doubt moguls deserve more respect than they've been granted, but Zanuck's skills were as an administrator and orchestrator, in exhortation and critique, not as the primary artistic talent. Custen, a professor at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York, and author of a previous study of Hollywood's biopic genre, has written a thoughtful and readable book which, nevertheless, seems anachronistic in its insistence on a great man theory of movie history. ■