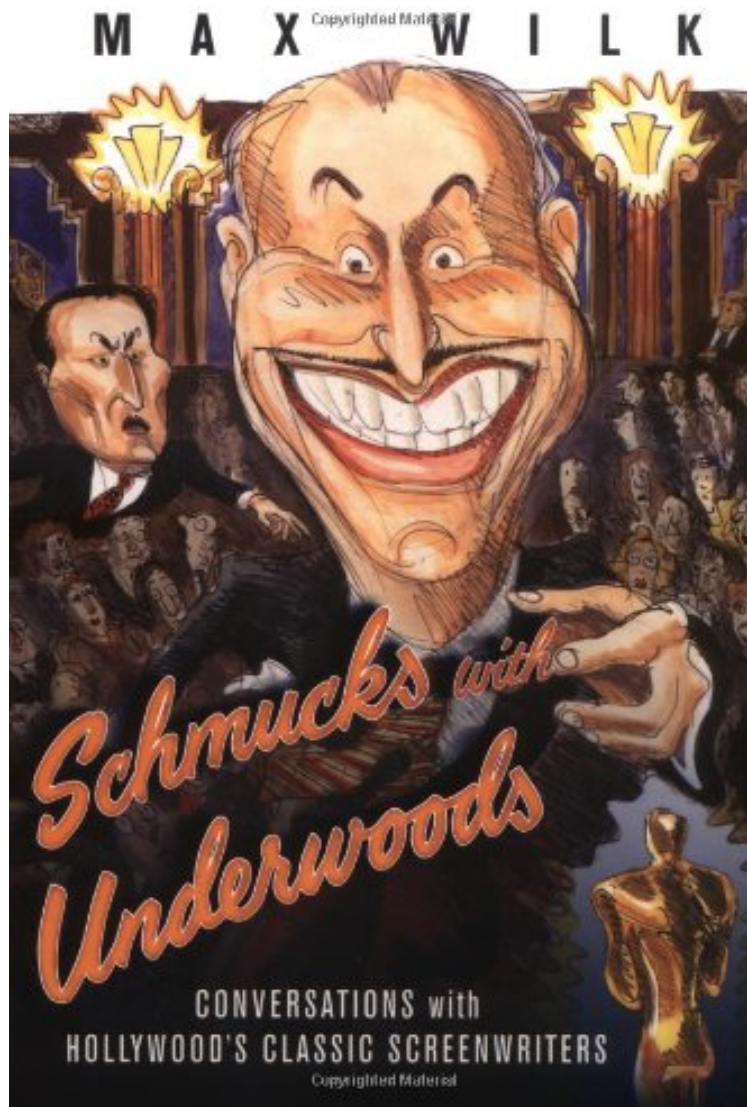


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Schmucks with Underwoods: Conversations with America's Classic Screenwriters

Max Wilk

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Max Wilk : Schmucks with Underwoods: Conversations with America's Classic Screenwriters before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Schmucks with Underwoods: Conversations with America's Classic Screenwriters:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Gary C.Great book; arrived promptly4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Tales of Yore...By A. RossBack in 1974, Wilk started work on this book,

interviewing some of the big names in screenwriting from roughly the '30s-'50s while they were still alive. He talked to writers like Sidney Buchman, Edward Chodorov, R.C. Sherriff, Benn Levy, John Collier, Billy Wilder, Donald Ogden Stewart, Albert and Frances Hackett, Harold Bloom, and profiled others like Arthur Caesar, Ben Hecht, Preston Sturges, and Harry Kurnitz. These gathered dust on his shelves for over 25 years until he revisited them, added interviews with Edmund Hartmann and Evan Hunter, and tied them all together in this attempt to document screenwriting life under the studio system. The results are a bit of a jumble, but well worth reading to gain a perspective on the history of the craft. For example, Chapter 2 provides an excellent overview of how, in the silent era, title writers could make or break a movie. Not only did they have to convey the action, setting, dialogue, and tone of a film, but they sometimes had to do so after the fact, making sure their lines would match the lip movements of the filmed characters! The examples Wilk gives of title-writer ingenuity are breathtaking, and one of the most desired was Ralph Spence, who, in 1925, could command \$10,000 per film. As sound came into the industry, writers faced even more bizarre challenges. For example it wasn't unusual for a writer to be given a script full of description, including camera shots, with big blank spaces for him to simply "fill in" the dialogue. This evolved into a practice of pairing writers into teams, where one would be responsible for plotting and action, and the other for dialogue. Sometimes, writing teams produced brilliant work even though the partners couldn't stand each other. One such team was William Lipmann and Horace McCoy, who couldn't get a day's work individually, but were in heavy demand as a team. However their animosity grew to the point where one would work from 9am-5pm and leave, then the other would come in and pick up the script from there and work from 9pm-5am! Just in case you think Hollywood is strange now, back then, the studio system produced a plethora of writing assignments that are difficult to imagine today. For example, sometimes a writer would be told to have a script ready in three weeks for particular group of three stars and a director. No plot, no idea, often not even a genre. Or even worse, just two stars and a title conjured up by a studio head. 1-2-3... write! Of course, many things are just as they always were. Consider the following from Benn Levy speaking of writing in the '30s, "Most scripts were written with fear and trepidation... Every line, every page, scrutinized... Every motivation questioned. All those arbitrary rules..." This is a fine book to dip into, littered with anecdotes (like how Ben Hecht wrote Scarface in nine days for \$1,000 a day), behind-the-scenes gossip (like how the Epstein brothers were discovered ghostwriting Living on Velvet for Jerry Wald and were hired by the studio), and advice from those who came (and excelled) before. (This review originally appeared in Creative Screenwriting magazine)

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Especially recommended for aspiring script writers of today

By Midwest Book Review

Schmucks With Underwoods: Conversations With Hollywood's Classic Screenwriters by Max Wilk is an enjoyable anthology offering rare glimpses into the lives, works, and perspectives of great screenwriters of Hollywood ranging over the last three decades, from legends like N. Behrman and John Cromwell, to Howard Koch and Dorothy Parker. A few black-and-white photographs are interspersed among the uniquely insightful text, in this recommended leisure reading which is especially recommended for aspiring script writers of today and dedicated fans of the great movie industry of Hollywood's yesteryears.

(Applause Books). "Where were you when the page was blank?!" a beleaguered screenwriter once asked a demanding director back in the golden age of movies. Max Wilk, an esteemed writer himself, admits "dignity for screenwriters is long overdue." That's why he has assembled this insightful homage to the men and women whose words created the foundation for our best and most-loved films. Here are face-to-face interviews with some of the historic giants of the industry, spanning the silent era to the 1960s, including Billy Wilder, Ernst Lubitsch, Sidney Buchman (Mr. Smith Goes to Washington), Donald Ogden Stewart (The Philadelphia Story), R.C. Sherriff (Goodbye Mr. Chips), Albert and Frances Hackett (It's a Wonderful Life), Evan Hunter (The Birds), John Collier, Edmund Hartmann, Ben Hecht, Nunnally Johnson and many more. In addition, Schmucks with Underwoods (a derogatory label for screenwriters coined by none other than the irascible Jack Warner) includes quotes and commentary about many other towering figures of the day, including Raymond Chandler, Edward Chodorov, Preston Sturges, Howard Koch, Dorothy Parker, Herman Mankiewicz and Paddy Chayefsky. Always entertaining, this book offers invaluable insight into the craft of writing, a fascinating portrait of a lost era of Hollywood, with enough hilarious anecdotes and behind-the-scenes trivia to please even the most casual movie buff.

From Booklist

The title repeats Jack L. Warner's phrase for the chumps who cranked out scripts on his lot, and most of the screenwriters Wilk interviewed admitted to feeling like schmucks at least part of the time in Hollywood. How could they not have, when, as Evan Hunter notes, no one there trusts even a best-selling writer, and everyone in the hierarchy, however young or inexperienced, feels qualified to slash the most carefully wrought scenes? The payoff for writers is that they still tell the best stories. This book is packed with fascinating, funny glimpses into the industry, from the silents to the big studios' early 1960s swan song. If the dictatorial producers, egocentric stars, and awful working conditions are familiar to movie lovers, the stories aren't because the writer's take is less frequently told. Turn to the silent era: often brought in after the footage was shot, writers were expected to punch up sagging story lines with clever titles. The Underwood owners Wilk talked with also include Ben Hecht, Billy Wilder, Harry Kurnitz, Preston

