

# Hollywood Ending,' a Cradle-to-Jail Biography of Harvey Weinstein

Ken Auletta looks for Weinstein's Rosebud in this dispiriting account of the former movie mogul's life.



By Alexandra Jacobs

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## HOLLYWOOD ENDING

### Harvey Weinstein and the Culture of Silence

By Ken Auletta

Illustrated. 466 pages. Penguin Press. \$30.

As you might expect, there aren't a whole lot of laughs in "Hollywood Ending," Ken Auletta's cradle-to-jail new biography of Harvey Weinstein, the movie mogul convicted of third-degree rape and another sex felony in New York and awaiting trial on further charges in California. When Auletta calls Weinstein's relationship with his brother Bob "Shakespeare-worthy," he is placing the story squarely in the tragedy column of the ledger.

But then the Broadway star Nathan Lane makes a brief appearance, like Puck cartwheeling onto the set of "Coriolanus."

The year was 2000, and Weinstein's cultural capital was perhaps at its peak. He was still running Miramax, the prestigious studio that he and Bob had started in 1979, albeit now under Disney's incongruous but lucrative oversight. He'd recently founded Talk magazine with the editor Tina Brown, then New York's nimblest puppeteer of high and low culture. He was hobnobbing with politicians, co-chairing a lavish birthday party and fund-raiser for then-Senate candidate Hillary Clinton at Roseland Ballroom. And he didn't like some of the jokes that Lane, anyone's dream M.C., had written for the occasion.

"I'll ruin your career," Weinstein threatened, in Auletta's retelling, as he "bellied" the elfin actor into a corner.

"You can't hurt me," Lane retorted. "I don't have a film career."

Onstage, Lane tauntingly said: "I'm going to do all the jokes Harvey Weinstein wanted me to cut."

This wasn't the last time that theater, of a sort, would win the day over the producer's preferred medium. Auletta attended every day of Weinstein's trial in 2020, narrating the experience here in four chapters. "Trials are not movies, shot under controlled conditions and subject to revision in the editing room," he writes. "They are live productions, dependent on the chemistry of their participants, and not a little bit of luck."

Books, of which Weinstein is demonstrably fond — his media mini-empire included a publishing imprint — *can* be like movies. Auletta effectively, if maybe a little too elegiacally, frames this one in the lengthy shadow of "Citizen Kane." Auletta is, of course, Jerry Thompson, the reporter looking for his antihero's Rosebud: the mysterious missing object or influence that will explain his personality. But he is also Citizen Ken, magnanimous and avuncular when he encourages his boss at The New Yorker, David Remnick, to publish the young journalist Ronan Farrow's investigation of Weinstein's misdeeds. The New York Times's Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey broke the story five days before Farrow's piece was published.



Ken Auletta, whose new book is "Hollywood Ending: Harvey Weinstein and the Culture of Silence."  
via the author

The well-connected Auletta draws on the work of those journalists and his own interviews with major players, including many surely fascinating hours with the beleaguered brother Bob. As for Harvey, he emails some terse responses to questions, and his representatives haggle over possible interview conditions before ghosting his biographer — but "Hollywood Ending" also mines an extensive profile Auletta wrote of him 20 years ago, and its outtakes. At that time, he had heard of Weinstein's sex crimes, an open secret for years, but was unable to get victims on the record, and so focused on his subject's bullying and prodigious

appetites. (“Kane” is famous for its breakfast montage. Weinstein’s montage would show him mainlining junk food: peanut M&Ms, French fries when interviewing a defense lawyer — ketchup “creating what looked like bloodstains” — Mentos at the trial and, more recently, contraband Milk Duds.)

Weinstein’s reputation for sexual trespass had started early, when he was a concert promoter in Buffalo. As he aged, his influence waned — the whole movie industry waned — just as he was seeking younger prey, from a cohort that “increasingly spent their free time on social networks like Facebook,” Auletta reminds, “rather than going to the movies.”

After the producer, then in his 60s, lunged from his office couch at Ambra Battilana Gutierrez, a 22-year-old Miss Italy finalist, in 2015 — “when he reached for her breasts like he was at an all-you-can-eat buffet,” as Auletta puts it — she did what many previous women who had been in her position, scared of Weinstein’s towering power, had been loath to do: She called the police. A publicist’s attempt to discredit Gutierrez was met with indignant cries that she was being “slut-shamed.” The fourth wave of feminism had arrived with a big splash, pulling Weinstein and his ilk into the undertow.

And yet the male foreman of the jury that convicted Weinstein, Auletta points out, cited the testimony and behavior of male witnesses, not female victims — “suggesting,” Auletta writes, “that ‘believe women’ may face a steep uphill climb.” He proposes instead “listen to women”; but one key woman’s voice is cast as soul-crushingly loud.

Searching for Rosebud, Auletta alights, for lack of better explanations, on the Weinstein brothers’ flame-haired and apparently flame-tempered mother, Miriam (for whom their company was named, along with their milder father, Max, a diamond cutter who died of a heart attack at 52). A childhood friend told Auletta that Harvey referred to Miriam as “Momma Portnoy,” after the shrill character in Philip Roth’s “Portnoy’s Complaint.”

Bob, who somehow avoided growing into a “beast,” as Harvey is repeatedly described here, allows for the possibility of Miriam’s frustration at her life’s limitations. “She could have been Sheryl Sandberg or one of these C.E.O.s of a company. She had that kind of smarts,” he told Auletta. Instead, she proudly brought rugelach to her sons’ headquarters, and had an epitaph worthy of Dorothy Parker: “I don’t like the atmosphere or the crowd.”

As there was a roving “fifth Beatle,” so there were a series of Miramax executives nicknamed the “third brother” — loyalists who helped to enable bad behavior — and, chillingly, a sort of “conveyor system to funnel women” to Weinstein’s hotel suites. If you’re not interested in the NC-17 and often disgusting particulars of what happened in those suites, nor in the headsmacking convolutions of nondisclosure agreements, perhaps you’d prefer one of the disgraced protagonist’s recommendations from the more tasteful era he worshiped, Elia Kazan’s autobiography, “A Life,” or a book Weinstein was often seen

carrying during trial preparation: “The Brothers Mankiewicz,” by Sydney Ladensohn Stern. Herman Mankiewicz is credited with the screenplay for “Citizen Kane”; his brother, Joe, wrote “All About Eve.”

Recalling those great movies, and even some from Miramax’s glory days in the ’90s, feels dispiriting, as the pictures, to paraphrase “Sunset Boulevard,” continue to get smaller. Going along for the ride of Weinstein’s slow rise and fall, even with the able Auletta at one’s side, can feel even more dispiriting, like getting on one of those creaky roller coasters at a faded municipal playland.

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