

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by J.E. Smyth, a historian, film critic, and professor at the University of Warwick and author of books including *Nobody's Girl Friday: The Women Who Ran Hollywood*, and *Edna Ferber's Hollywood: American Fictions of Gender, Race, and History*. But today she's here to talk about the subject of her book, *Mary C. McCall Jr.: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood's Most Powerful Screenwriter*. So first, can you introduce us to Mary's place in film history?

JES: Mary, up until very recently, didn't seem to have any place in film history. She just was entirely absent. When I was a graduate student, eons ago, supposedly learning film history, we never really talked about women in Hollywood, surprise, surprise, not even directors like Dorothy Arzner. And I think nowadays, for people who maybe watch Turner Classic Movies or read *Sight and Sound* or tune into the Criterion Channel, maybe you know that Ida Lupino wasn't just an actress back in good old classical Hollywood days, that she was also a director and screenwriter and even produced her own work, or that there was somebody named Dorothy Arzner who started out as a secretary and eventually became a director. But very little is actually known about writers or discussed. Writers are always at the bottom of the pile, ironically, whether they're men or women, but female screenwriters in particular just seem to get short shrift, particularly in what's known as the studio system. So after the silent era, really in the Depression during the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, the golden age of Hollywood, very often that's taken to be an era that's just about men, men being behind the camera. They are the geniuses of the system who are making the films. And then women are the decorative objects who are in front of it. And they can maybe be casting couch victims or secretaries fetching coffee, but they can't be writing the pictures. But the fact was Mary McCall Jr. was not just a screenwriter, but she was the most powerful screenwriter during the studio system. She was the one who negotiated chiefly with the producers to win all screenwriters a contract in the early 1940s.

So she had been in Hollywood since the 1930s. She became chair of the Hollywood Council of Guilds and Unions during the strike waves. She was an academy governor of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' administrative wing. She founded the Academy Foundation alongside Cary Grant and some others. So the museum that you have in Los Angeles now, the Margaret Herrick Library with the archive, all of the outreach, even they sponsored my book. None of that would have happened if it hadn't been for Mary. And she also managed to write one of the most popular franchises during the Hollywood studio system, Maisie, about a working class showgirl. She worked with Dorothy Arzner. They were very great friends throughout their lives. She wrote some of the biggest hits during this period. And she was known by everybody during her career and then just seemed to vanish from the pages of history. So that by the time I turned up on the scene as a student, there was just nothing about her at all.

AT: And we're going to get into what happened to her legacy later on. But first, I'd like to know more about her writing.

JES: Well, I think you have to go back to her work as a novelist and as a short fiction writer, because she didn't just go to Hollywood as maybe many men did in the 1920s and '30s as a hack newspaper writer at one of these cheap little papers in Chicago or New York. She was actually somebody when she went west. So she wrote a best-selling novel that basically spoofed the career of Charles Lindbergh, probably one of the biggest media jerks during the 1920s and '30s. But he actually was known to her personally. She grew up with the Lindberghs. The Morrows were across the street from her in Englewood. And she knew Elizabeth very well. And when she was thinking about, well, you're always supposed to write what you know when you're a budding writer, what do I know? And she was like, well, I have a front row seat and how the media is constructing a hero out of this blonde, racist jerk. And she turned it into a very funny spoof and satire on the way that Americans and the American media are so into creating something out of nothing. And that really was what attracted Darryl Zanuck to her. He wanted to option the book at Warner Brothers where he was working at the time and brought her over. And she said, "well, I'd like to adapt it." He was like, "oh, no, no, no. We never have

writers adapt their own work because they lack the distance, the objectivity. We'll never get them to cut any of their dialogue, but you can write something else." So he gave her some other stuff and she worked there for a bit, but she was very well respected. She was one of the few writers of her generation really who had a college degree. So she went to Vassar when it was still a woman's college and respected institution. She was very proud of that. And she wrote for *The New Yorker* when it was getting started. And of course writing for *The New Yorker* in the '20s didn't make you much money. So she ended up writing for a lot of the other middle-class pictorial magazines that so many Americans bought at that time. Because that's great really, thinking about it as a historian, because the period that she was living in was a wonderful one for writers. There was such an audience, particularly among women who were educated, who were entering the workforce, who had more time on their hands and who wanted to display their connection to their culture of them, their middle-class credentials. And so subscribing to magazines was the thing to do. And some families had six, seven subscriptions and they needed stories to fill those magazines. And this is how she and so many of her female, and male, colleagues were able to make a decent living before they went to Hollywood.

When she did go to Hollywood, she really wanted to write about women and ordinary people, immigrants as well too. She was from an Irish-American family, but an extremely middle class one. Her grandfather was one of the richest men in the United States in the 1890s. And so she saw Irishness, I suppose, through a different vista for most people, most of them in New York. But she had a lot of working class Irish friends. So James Cagney was a close friend of hers and Humphrey Bogart, who was more of a West side boy, very posh. They also had a great time running around Manhattan together. So she had an exciting social life. She would write about some of the women who were becoming writers when she was in the early days of working for Warner Brothers. She wrote stories as well too, about up and coming actresses, script girls or whatever, having to cope with the workforce. But what she really wanted to do was to do her own pictures.

And it was hard because she was fired briefly in 1933 when it was really tough to hold onto a job in Hollywood. It was a terrible year, most of the studios couldn't meet their payrolls and there were all kinds of cuts. She went back to New York and then she came back the year after when things were a bit better. And she was only one of two female screenwriters at Warner Brothers, and they basically fed her whatever crap the male writers had screwed up. So she was one of the few writers to actually have a college degree and Hal Wallace, who by then had taken over from Zanuck. Zanuck had gone on to better things, running his own studio. Wallace gave her Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* to adapt, like, "well, this is a smart woman. She can handle this." And he said to her, "these two guys, they've made this adaptation. And I don't know, I've never read *Babbitt*, but it doesn't seem to me like it really fits with what I've heard it's about." And she read the script and was just like, "it's not, it's not." And so she had to basically do everything from scratch. She was really quick though. She could turn things around like lightning. I think the McCall signature is really her repartee. She had a great ear for dialogue and she was also very close with actors. She loved the relationship between actors and writers. And so when she was crafting dialogue on a project, she always wanted to know the actors that she was working for. So she would tailor her writing to suit the speech patterns, the comedic talents, the strengths of the various players who were going to be cast in the picture. And so she really wanted to know what certain actors were capable of. And she was great. They felt the camaraderie. And I think to a certain extent, this bled into her life offscreen as well too, because in the early days when she was not writing pictures and she was working to organize the union of the Screen Writers Guild, she and many actors were working alongside one another because the actors of course didn't get recognized as a union until 1937. But they learned a lot of their skills from working with her and her writing colleagues, and they shared a lot together. So she really did believe in that connection that when you looked at a Hollywood motion picture, you really had to focus on the script and the acting. And I think probably the thing she was most famous for in the business is when she gave the writing awards in 1943, when writers finally had a contract, she gave her speech and it was said to be the best one of the evening because it was the shortest. She just looked at everybody in the audience and said, "in the beginning was the word." And that was a heads up to the producers who had basically been shortchanging writers for decades, that writers weren't powerless any longer. And Hollywood would always stand or fall by the toughness and the

quality of its scripts. And for a while, it seemed that producers listened.

AT: Now, going back to how you were talking about her respect for actors and that collaborative nature. One of the things that you talk about is her relationship with Bette Davis, who was also a powerful woman in her own right. And one of the things that's come up before, not just in the context of Hollywood, but more broadly is that even if you are the only woman in the room at a given time, there is never just one woman in a story. Women's stories do not exist in isolation from other women, which is why movies that don't pass the Bechdel test are particularly annoying. But I am curious about how female relationships played a role in her story specifically because this is such a collaborative art form. And I've heard stories about women in Hollywood in this era who were deliberately lifting each other up and mentoring each other and encouraging and promoting each other, even if not all of them choose to.

JES: I wrote about a lot of instances where this happened in *Nobody's Girl Friday*, which was a broader history of the industry from the '20s through the early '50s, when women actually counted in so many ways in the studio system. They counted as people behind the camera and all sorts of professions. So not just screenwriters and actors, but as film editors, secretaries, legal counsel, animal trainers, costume designers, producers, associate producers, it just goes on and on and on. And you have very many cases basically from the early days of cinema of powerful women trying to help others and even less powerful or more vulnerable women actually going out of their way to help others in the profession. So I'm thinking in particular about Mary Pickford and how she helped Barbara McLean, the film editor in the early stages of her career, and really was a model for McLean to see how women could lead in so many areas of motion picture production. She basically ran her own productions in so many ways, but there was a sense of collaboration and everybody working together that she didn't feel, I think, when she was working with men later in her career and she regretted that. But then there's also the case, of course, of someone like Clara Bow in the later stages of her career being extraordinarily loved by her fans, but also sneered at by other more middle-class members of the Hollywood community. And yet, when she is under so much stress and pressure, she goes out of her way to help an unknown extra named Jean Harlow when she needs that extra push.

And this is something, of course, that McCall worked on as a union organizer. So when she was in the business and she would organize other women writers, she and her other colleague at Warner Brothers would work together. And she, of course, knew Bette Davis from the early days when she was at Warner Bros. And then afterward after she was fired, they definitely stayed in touch because they had shared birthdays and they used to party together and they had a lot of shared experiences and were feminists to the core. And they helped each other along through career ups and downs. And I think definitely in the Screenwriters Guild as well too, McCall had a lot of close friends. She mentored very many women writers as well too. Harriet Frank Jr., again, another Jr woman writer, was another one of her mentees early in her career. She had a really close relationship with Betty Reinhardt, who later on helped her write some of the Maisie films in the early 1940s. This is when McCall had so many other committee calls in her time that she couldn't always do things, but she was close with Marguerite Roberts, who had a very long career despite the fact that she was blacklisted for a number of years. She later made a comeback writing for, of all people, John Wayne in the late 1960s. So she wrote *True Grit* for him. There are all sorts of instances of women being aware of the sexism, but also looking at this period in the '30s and '40s and saying, "well, you know what? Our mothers led the first fight," the first wave, as it was later called. "We are the equals of men." This was a period, of course, when the Equal Rights Amendment was not passing in the Congress and the Senate, but it was still talked about. It was still believed in. I think a lot of times when we look back on this period in American history, we think, well, there's the first wave that ends with the winning of the vote in 1920 and the 19th Amendment. Then there's basically nothing happens to women's history until the second wave and Betty Friedan pens her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, with a lot of help from Pauli Murray, who again goes uncredited. But the fact is that during this period, you have some of the most interesting achievements and feminism that historians don't like to think about. They're sort

of caught up in the sense of waves and what happens between the waves is, for me, it's much more interesting than what happens in the 1960s, where it becomes sort of more or less commodified to a certain extent, a commodified feminism. But McCall and her peers, whether it's Bette Davis or Barbara McLean or Ida Coverman, who was the unseen hand of power at MGM, all of these extraordinarily powerful women, they just believed in equal rights.

This was a period as well too, when there is new legislation that's being passed by Roosevelt that's covering the right to strike and minimum wages are on the books for the first time and you get protections for women working as well as for men. There are women who are covered in the newspapers and who are actually writing some of these articles that are saying women are making higher salaries than President Roosevelt and a lot of them were making these salaries in Hollywood. Of course, McCall herself was on the rich list quite a lot. So I think there was a great celebration of success, women's success, and there was a real core of feminine power in Hollywood in the '30s and '40s, and it did tend to go across parties as well too. McCall was a Roosevelt Democrat. She and Helen Gahagan Douglas, who would later go on to be congressmen in Los Angeles and of course was famously beaten by Richard Nixon in the Senate race where he smeared her as a communist, as a pink lady. She had all kinds of friends on the Republican side as well too. It might be unfashionable to say so now, but the Republican party was the first party to really recognize the Equal Rights Amendment in its political plank in 1940. It took another four years for the Democrats to come around to that. There were political organizations and organizations of Republican businesswomen that were very vocal in their support of equal rights and equal opportunities for women in education and in the workforce. Someone like Hedda Hopper, for example, who would later be known as a anti-communist red baiter and an enemy really of a lot of McCall's friends on the left. She nonetheless was always plugging McCall's career and saying how wonderful it was that she was so powerful and on so many committees and doing all of this work. She also gave Bette Davis a lot of credit in her column, and Bette Davis was even more public, I think, in her political support of Roosevelt, so she campaigned for him openly. To a certain extent, there was a bit of a reaching across the table amongst women in Hollywood, and it was heartening to see.

It doesn't last, unfortunately. It all falls apart, basically, around 1944, '45, toward the end of the war. But I think to a certain extent, a lot of that sense of a coalition of feminists, it's due in no small part to McCall. She was able to touch so many people with her sense of community, I think, in Hollywood, and she was able to bring people together. So even men who we would want to class as misogynists or as right-wingers or whatever, she was able to speak their language to a certain extent and get them to make a compromise. I think there aren't many compromises in American society these days, but she was very adept at it. Maybe to a certain extent, because she came from such a wealthy business class family, she knew what these guys thought about, how their minds worked. I think when she was a union organizer, this stood her in good stead to be able to manipulate them properly in order to get them to come to the table and agree that for the benefit of all writers, there needed to be a contract in place and there needed to be some common ground in Hollywood.

AT: Well, I know Meryl Streep has talked about the fact that women have to learn to understand men because men are the ones in power and men are the ones that all the stories are about, but often men don't have to learn to understand women. That's a great example of the empathy gap that I've talked about before in different conversations. Very much, if you are the marginalized person, then you need to know how to talk like and to the people with privilege, whether that's a neurodivergent person masking, whether it's a person of color code switching, that's very common. And so when we're talking about, she knew how to communicate with people, I don't know that we've actually explained exactly how influential she was as a labor organizer, because we've touched on different aspects of it, but can you really help us understand how much her influence is still felt today because of what she was able to accomplish?

JES: The sort of core of the Writers Guild of America West's union provision is the minimum basic agreement. And that in her generation, it would have been known simply as the contract. That's what she wanted. So prior

to the contract being in place, so it was actually voted in in 1941, but was only enforced in 1942 when she officially became president of the Screenwriters Guild. Before that, writers are really treated like cattle. They were hired and fired in batches. You could be hired speculatively and not paid and be told by a producer to write something along a certain line, and then you'd be strung along for months in some cases, and then basically sent away, "oh, well, it didn't work out" with no money. There were other cases as well, too, of someone working substantially for months on a script and then not getting any credit for it. And then in some cases, a producer actually taking full credit for what a writer had written. There were no protections for credit. There were no protections for the minimum time between hiring and firing. There was no minimum wage. It was really a wide-open, cutthroat industry. And producers to a certain extent were brought to heel with actors because actors were very well able to communicate that if they went on strike, that there would be absolutely no motion pictures. And that the only reasons really that the fans came was because they wanted to see certain stars acting in good scripts. And the star argument penetrated the thick skulls of the producers, but the idea of paying writers adequately took them a bit longer to come to grips with.

And I think McCall, she comes back to Hollywood in 1934, and she's very quiet about it at first because she's building her reputation. And she starts writing a few articles where she's saying in the guild magazines, writers and actors need to work together. There needs to be a motion picture school where different branches of the filmmaking community can come in formally together and discuss best practice or innovation so that we can make better motion pictures. She was all for realism and basically throwing away a lot of the sophisticated crap about wealthy people that MGM basically was putting out at the time. To a certain extent, she admired Warner Brothers for their ability to engage with social issues, but she said, you're not really going far enough. She was able to reach across into various guilds and unions so the writers weren't siloed and isolated. And so very slowly they were able to accumulate power. But of course, as a labor organizer, she had to keep everybody who was working in the guild secret. All of the membership names were secret because if producers found out that a writer was a member of the guild, particularly before the contract was in place, they could be blacklisted for good. And in fact, Jack Warner does find out that she's involved in union organizing. She objects to certain components of writers' and actors' salaries being set aside for political campaigns who were friends of the producers. So she's a Democrat and neither she nor Jimmy Cagney, who was at the Screen Actors Guild at the time, liked it very much that they were basically told that they had to give some of their salary to a Republican candidate, that didn't go over very well. But she complained about this and it got round. And eventually she was sacked. At the time she was working at Columbia Pictures with Dorothy Arzner on *Craig's Wife*, which was basically a satire of what it's like to be a housewife, a slave in the 1930s. And she's fired. Dalton Trumbo is also fired. They were both working together at the same time.

And there really wasn't any recourse, but Harry Cohn was a bit different. And I think McCall put it very well. She said she preferred an honest rogue to a hypocrite like Mayer. And certainly Cohn was a rogue, but he didn't care about writers' politics. He liked good writing. And so he was like, "well, you can work for me until you get fed up with a lower salary." Eventually she did. But she was really able to convince people that the Guild could work for everybody, that it wasn't just for the few who could earn the big salaries with the producer. She wanted an agreement that would cover everybody. There was a lot of difficulty with the Actors Guild because a lot of actors didn't think it was worthwhile advocating for extra talent. They didn't want extra actors being covered by their agreement. And McCall said, "that's not happening with the Writers Guild. Anybody who's a writer, if they belong to the Guild, we will fight for them. We will enforce credits. We will make sure that the terms of the agreement are adhered to, however lengthy or short your credit history is in terms of your work in Hollywood, that's it." And young people really flocked to her, new writers at the Guild. She didn't discriminate. Men and women felt that they could deal with her. There were a lot of cases in the archives that I found in the Writers Guild Foundation Library of Writers, writing to the membership. And she was always on the board doing various tasks. She could always be relied upon to be a chief administrator in the Guild's inner workings. A lot of other people couldn't be persuaded to be on committees. I guess that really hasn't changed all that much. But she was there. And she would listen. And when she was president, and she was president three

times, at the best of times her writers in the early '40s and probably the worst of times as well too, in the early 1950s. And in the war time, she was able to get pay raises. She was able to bring producers to heel and basically say, "you can't lie about credits. You can't take credit for work that you haven't written." She was able to help a lot of women as well as men. But there were a lot more cases where I would see women who were writing to her where there would actually be a significant change. They were actually able to get their cases heard and to get some restitution. But of course, later in the 1950s, after the blacklist was basically in full swing, her colleagues begged her to come back. She was the woman who had gotten them pay raises during the war and had gotten the contract enforced and everybody loved her. And they were suffering some pretty bad times because of the blacklist and because there were all sorts of efforts to restrict the union.

And in the past, well, the Communist Party wasn't really outlawed in the United States, but don't tell anybody in the 1947 or '51 hearings that. But there was a case of a writer who had worked at RKO motion picture studio in Hollywood, in the past it produced the Astaire and Rogers pictures in the 1930s, but it had gone under. Howard Hughes, a millionaire who had occasionally produced films back in the early days, he had done with Jean Harlow, he had basically gutted the studio and fired almost everybody. But he had this one film on the books called *The Las Vegas Story*. And this writer called Paul Jericho had written most of it. And when Hughes found out that he was going to be called before a 1951 committee because of his political affiliations, he had been a communist, he fired him. And Jericho goes to the guild and basically says, help. And McCall could have done what every other head of the union was doing in Hollywood at that time and basically kowtow to the producers and say, "well, just vanish or whatever. We can't really deal with you because this kind of a case could potentially bring down the guild." But no, she sued Howard Hughes for violating the minimum basic agreement. "A contract is a contract," she said to Hughes. "You didn't have to hire this guy. We didn't force you to. He is a member of our guild and we may not agree with his politics either, but that's just the way it is. You cannot discriminate." But unfortunately the judges in California in the 1950s did discriminate and they sided with Hughes. And McCall was just, her career basically was over after that. The guild itself was basically over. They had to rewrite the agreement so that it would enable discrimination of writers based on their political affiliation. So communists were not covered. And she basically threw in the towel after that. She said, three times president is enough and everything is against me. But eventually that bit of the contract was rectified after the blacklist. And people did recognize what she had done. And she continued to go on strikes for residuals and as part of her work for the Television, Radio and Television Guild that she belonged to in the 1950s when her film credits started to dry up. But she was always on the picket lines. The writer's strikes did not go away in the 1950s and '60s. And occasionally at one of those picket lines, somebody would have a sign up and one of the signs would say, "in the beginning was the word."

So the membership remembered her. They remembered what she had done. And to give the guild credit, she did get the first Valentine Davies Award for her contributions to the guild membership. She was the woman who wrote the first history of the Screenwriters Guild. They asked her to do it because they felt the most objective one who could unite both perspectives on the left and the right. And she got the Edmund H. North Award when she was months away from dying from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's in the mid 1980s. So she was remembered by her guild. And then I think really toward the end of the 20th century, the memory just seemed to fade. I guess the old timers were dying off and none of the historians who were writing about the blacklist apart from one, Nancy Lynn Schwartz, was a really tragic story. She interviewed a lot of those old timers from the '30s and '40s when she was writing her book, *The Hollywood Writers Wars*, and she interviewed McCall. And actually that was one of the few books where I was actually able to learn anything at all about Mary McCall when I started to do some work on her. But Nancy died young and her mother had to finish the book. And it wasn't one of the books that tended to be on reading lists for histories of the blacklist or of writers. Instead you got a lot of stuff written by men. And there you got the usual subjects when you were talking about the blacklist and who really defended freedom of speech and the First Amendment, etc. And all of the heroes were men. So the heroes of the blacklist were men, the heroes in the fight against anti-communist slanders were all men. And McCall was really airbrushed from these histories. I was reading some notes that one of the authors of one of

these chief books about the blacklist wrote about her. And the comment was, "she doesn't look like your idea of a labor union leader." Oh, I wonder why. Is it because she wears a skirt? So it's that kind of sexism. And I think that was one of the things that surprised me the most or maybe not surprised me, but I got a bit grim when I was thinking about it because her own industry celebrated her. She was always in the national papers. Her guild celebrated her when she was their leader. And it's like when film history starts getting written, she's airbrushed. And there are all these comments about how, when the labor unions come to town in Hollywood, women just sort of lose all power. They become less important. Oh yes? Oh really? And it's that kind of stuff as if women don't fit in a labor union or they don't fit in Hollywood because Hollywood's making more money. And how many exceptions basically do historians need before they pay attention to what was actually the rule in Hollywood was that if you made somebody money and if you were good at your job, you could make it up to a point. But the old boys who were running the motion picture studios back in the '30s and '40s and '50s, they took risks occasionally, and if the best man to do something was a woman, they would hire her.

And I think when the system fell apart, and this is the tragedy because a lot of people think, "oh, when this Hollywood studio system goes away. It's better for filmmaking, because you have more independence." And what happens is you get all of these bros who get the opportunity to write and direct their own motion pictures and they end up hiring more bros to work on the films. Whereas during the studio system, they make 250 pictures a year, each one of them. And they'll have an interest, they'll have a roster of people who are on the payroll. So they'll be like, okay, we've got this new picture. So we're going to have Viola Lawrence do the editing because she is not doing something right now, or we'll have Barbara McLean do the editing, or we'll have Mary McCall write the script because she's on the payroll, she needs something. And that's why it happened because you have the women there and they work for you and that's how they get the credits. But in the brave new world, this is a post-studio era, you get a lot of changes and they do not favor women.

That's the thing. And the content of the films does not favor women. Back in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, there were a lot of films about women because people knew that women were the major audience for these motion pictures. They were the ones who were bringing the ticket sales in. So you had films like *Maisie*. So you had films like *Gone with the Wind* that were about women. So McCall is this incredible woman. She's done so much, right? She's on every committee basically in town, everybody knew who she was, but she wasn't alone. There were hundreds of other women she worked with who were involved in this community and they had a voice and they were sometimes paid attention to, but trying to dig out their names was a real task 10 years ago when I was working on *Nobody's Girl Friday*, because basically the logic among film historians was that, well, women might've had some power back in the early days with Alice Guy-Blache and Lois Weber, but everything vanishes basically when Hollywood starts to make money. And I was just like, "oh, yes? Oh yes? Oh, really?" This sounds like the argument that historians make about women's history, that there's no such thing as a feminist between 1920 and 1962.

This biography about her, it comes from a place of reckoning with a lot of different elements within American history and labor history and film history and women's history. Even sort of looking at the roster of women who were writing for MGM or for Columbia Pictures, it's astounding how many women were actually writing these motion pictures. There were motion picture editors. They were producers as well, too. So somebody like Margaret Booth was an editor. She was a supervising editor, but she also worked in an unofficial capacity as a producer for Irving Thalberg. Very often, you have cases at Columbia where I have a woman who was a supervising producer. So this is Virginia Van Upp. So you do have women who are calling the shots a lot of the time. And of course you've got Ida Lupino who is ironically funded by Howard Hughes, Mary McCall's *bête noire*. But she's producing and directing and writing motion pictures in the late 1940s, early '50s and doing really challenging content for the time as well too. So she's not doing a lot of fluff. So I think it's probably safe to say that women, when we think about it as well too, there's this sense that the director now, I think for a lot of people, they think, well, the most important creative force in motion pictures is really the director. It's the auteur. And we get this, I suppose, from the French who, when they were rediscovering Hollywood in the 1950s, just were fawning all over John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock. And I think these two guys obviously had a great sense

of ego, a great sense of self, but they would have been, they were nothing really without the editors and screenwriters who would help their careers along in the early stages and the cinematographers as well too. But film is a collaborative art, and particularly in the studio system. So in the studio system, a director very often would be assigned late in the game. So a producer would have much more power and sort of coordinating what a film would look like. And yes, these producers were men, but the producer would work and Darryl Zanuck's case, for example, was who worked very often with McCall, he would work with his chief editor. And so the editor, Barbara McLean would actually have a lot to say about how a film was put together. And editors, a lot of these were women and they at the time were able to tell directors that they needed to shoot more material. They needed to shoot more protection shots or different angles or more closeups. And they would be the final arbiters of what a film looked like when it was put together. So a director was basically just saying, Oh, put the camera there and shoot. But it's the editor who puts things together and writes the language of film during this time. And these were women, a lot of them, the ones who were getting a lot of the credit and the attention and the press as artists, as editing artists for women. And I think in terms of writing as well too, you do have a lot of women. Frances Marion is certainly one that comes to mind. McCall, when she was writing her work for Dorothy Arzner and later in the Maisie series and her work, the Sullivans that she does as an independent in 1943, when you write alone, you have control. And very few writers were actually able to do that. But what McCall is able to do is she is able to put an agreement in place with producers. So you can't have writers disempowered. You can't have these shenanigans going on. You can't have women predominantly being ghostwriters for other writers work and not getting paid enough. And so they do have the creative power. And so I think my plea for film history in the future is that there is a greater recognition of the collaborative aspect of motion pictures that, in terms of film connoisseurship and appreciation these days, it's all about directors, but people of that generation knew that there were a lot of hands that had to work together to make a good film. And some of these hands were women's.

AT: And you've mentioned, I think a couple times, the Maisie films, which were, I would say revolutionary for the time. So can you tell us how and why and any lasting impact that you feel like that's had on film?

JES: Well, it's true that there were serials that focused on women and action women in particular since the early days of cinema. So there's Pearl White, there's Helen Holmes. There are all kinds of Western serials that were focused on women. And serials or franchises, follow-on films, they were often an integral part of motion picture production. And I think when McCall came to MGM in 1938, they were kind of wary of her. She'd made a name for herself. She was a good writer and they wanted her. And MGM had so many women writers. It was known as the mothership. That's what Dorothy Parker called it. So there were a lot of women there and Virginia Kellogg and other writers said that the girls tended to support other women. There was a real community there and McCall was happy about that. And also because it was the best place to get a top salary. So if you went to MGM, you'd arrived basically as a writer, but they gave her Maisie, her second picture. First one had been about acting, a group of women who were acting, and it was called Dramatic School. And she'd like that, but Maisie she got to basically make from scratch. And there was a novel that had been written by this guy that she was basically able to throw out the window and make her own stuff up. And one of the critics who later saw the film in 1939, the first Maisie, said that it ought to get an award for the best picture that completely disregarded its source material. So she was on her own, she had a producer that was really light touch who was letting her do whatever she wanted with the gags. And so she wrote about this woman who was in a way, her alter ego. She was this freelance, working-class girl. She was Irish-American and McCall realized that there's so much of Hollywood is about displaying the female body glamorously. If we think about old Hollywood, it's about these gorgeous women who are absolutely perfect living these incredible lives in these palaces. And they always look absolutely perfect. They're always wearing Adrian gowns and they have like jewels and their social lives are just to be envied, whatever. They don't have to work. They've got like a servant or a maid running after them. And she's like, no, women want some of that, yes. But they also want women



who have to put up with what they have to put up with. So the sexual harassment in the workplace, the getting fired all the time and having to look for work, the not having a decent boyfriend or a husband, wanting to have that kind of independence and be free of the misogyny. Someone who can't afford great clothes, someone who never went to college, basically doesn't talk properly or sounds like she's working class. And she gave them that with Maisie and Maisie just resonated with women. There had been cases of serial films that had been tried for a few years. There was the Blondie series about the comic strip, a wife at Columbia. And there was a few Nancy Drew films that were done in 1939, '40. And there was one at Warner Brothers called Torchy Blane, which is about a reporter, but Maisie was done at MGM. It was done lavishly, it lasted through 10 pictures. It spanned eight years. There was a radio show that followed on that McCall didn't have anything to do with. It was a big deal and it turned Anne Southern into a major star.

And it was also a case where MGM realized that films could be popular and could really become cultural milestones. And they didn't have to be million dollar films. They didn't have to be aimed at a rich clientele. They could do something that seemed deceptively ordinary, but which was funny, had a lot of great snappy lines and then had a heroine who didn't need to get the guy really in the end, the guy really wasn't the important thing because with every new Maisie film, she would basically get the job, get the money, win whatever it was, but you'd have a new guy at the next film. So in a way she's like James Bond. So when I was first watching these films, I was like, "man, Maisie's like the female equivalent of James Bond in the '40. I love this." And then I found out that one of McCall's closest friends and one of the writers that she mentored early in his career was Richard Maibaum. And Richard Maibaum, if you Google him, he was involved in writing all of the early James Bond scripts for Sean Connery. So maybe he learned a thing or two from what McCall was doing with Maisie. It's certainly possible. And later when he was making his success, he tried to bring Maisie back. McCall obviously had gone through the hell of being basically blacklisted because she had gone toe-to-toe with a producer and sued him and done so much for labor unions in Hollywood. And nobody really wanted to hire her in a motion picture set, tried to get Maisie turned into a pilot, a television series in the late 1950s. And there was a pilot with Janis Paige, but it never really made it to a television series because I think really at that time, TV did employ some women. The salaries were much lower than what they had gotten as screenwriters, but a lot of the content was very regressive. There weren't that many feminist shows. And I think you could certainly argue that there was a lot of proto-feminism in some of the early studio system films about women in the '30s and '40s. Certainly Molly Haskell argued this when she was talking about the incredible films that were made at this time for women. And there was a kind of waning away in the 1950s where they were basically turned into housewives. And I think this definitely happened with TV because what do you get, *Gunsmoke*, you get *Rawhide*, you get all of these sort of westerns with men. And I don't think that Maisie really fit with the culture in the United States in the late '50s, early '60s.

AT: Now I'm always curious what makes people connect to certain stories. So what was it about this person and her story that made you personally say, yes, I need to write a whole book about this person?

JES: When you find out that McCall started a group called Frankly Over 40 in 1946, basically protesting ageism in Hollywood. And she has some of the top historians and artists and actors and writers working alongside of her. This is pretty exciting stuff. She also is one of the founders of the Academy Foundation. So she tries to get the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to think outside of its sort of capitalist roots that actually owes something to society that they should have a film archive, that they should be interested in outreach and film festivals and making connections with other countries. So this is her vision. She's instrumental in getting, for example, Laurence Olivier, his Oscar in 1948 for *Hamlet*. She wants more British and non-American films to get recognition at the Academy Awards. Sometimes that's not very popular. She's the three-time president of the Screenwriters Guild. She's incredible. She's chair of the Hollywood Council of Guilds and Unions. So she was elected by about 16,000 motion picture workers to lead the effort against the studios and the post-war strike waves and the Hollywood anti-Nazi league. She's involved in all kinds of work.

For example, the war documentaries that were made from 1943, '44, '45, she's coordinating all of those. So she's head of the War Activities Committee in Hollywood. So she's coordinating everything. And there are dozens of documentaries that she is responsible for the logistics and producing and getting the content out and getting things on time. She's managing all of that. She's writing the Maisie series. She's also the first writer who's a woman who really gets a percentage deal in the sort of host guild minimum basic agreement era. And she writes about how she gets a deal. So she's not a producer per se, but she gets a percentage of the profits. And instead of basically doing what a man would do and not write about it and basically keep his deal and his good luck to himself, she puts it in the pages of the *Screenwriter* magazine.

So she wants young writers, whether they're male or female, to know exactly how you go about getting a better deal for yourself. She really cared about this and she loved writing and she loved writers. And she was an extraordinarily giving woman. She saw Hollywood as a community. She loved motion pictures. She loved all branches of motion picture filmmaking, and she wanted filmmakers in whatever branch they came from to work together for the betterment of the art. And she wanted writers to have greater respect. And she really recognized the bedrock relationship in any kind of dramatic enterprise, which is the relationship between the actor and the writer. That's, into a certain extent, it's all that matters if you have that. And it really propelled so much of the great work that was done in Hollywood during the '30s and '40s. I think she was a fantastic individual.

I don't know how she did what she did and to see how she was completely erased in film history and how even at the end of the 20th century, early part of the 21st, people weren't paying any attention to her. It really made my blood boil. I get sick to death of hearing about auteurs and about great films. And I mean, so much of this stuff drives the business of film connoisseurship. But that said, when I had written this, I did actually approach a couple of women editors because I thought, "well, it'd be nice to have a female editor's input." And I was basically told that it wouldn't sell. "Oh, it's a lovely story, but it wouldn't sell. Oh no. And actually you're focusing on one woman and, yes, maybe she was this great, but shouldn't we really be celebrating all women?" And I said, "well, I wrote that book already. You can see my collected works. Here's the woman who really deserves to have a biography, a standalone biography." And I said, "I'm not writing another biography of a star. Sorry. No. I want something that really does speak to the whole industry and the amnesia in the industry as well to this willingness to forget its great women."

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.