

American Movie Critics: From the Silents Until Now

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He can't wait to read it! He was amazed at how much information it contained.

A provocative and dynamic force in American culture since the early twentieth century, movies have presented several generations of American writers with a new, fascinating, and challenging subject. How writers rose to the challenge, and in the process created an extraordinary body of work—passionate, contentious, restlessly curious—makes for a dazzling and constantly entertaining volume. "I have focused," writes editor Phillip Lopate, "on film criticism as an art in itself—the magnet for strong, elegant, eloquent, enjoyable writing." *American Movie Critics* is an anthology of unparalleled scope that charts the rise of movies as art, industry, and mass entertainment. Beginning in the silent era—with poets Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg hailing the new medium and Edmund Wilson paying tribute to Chaplin's *Gold Rush*—the collection traces the rapid evolution of the medium in an age of tumultuous political and social changes. Here are the great movie critics who forged a forceful vernacular idiom for talking about the new art: Otis Ferguson in the 1930s finding in James Cagney "the dignity of the genuine worn as easily as his skin"; James Agee in the 1940s on American war films and the advent of Italian neo-realism; Manny Farber, Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, Molly Haskell, Vincent Canby, and others from what Lopate calls "the golden age of movie criticism" from the 1950s through the '70s, a period when enthusiasms ran high, and arguments over style and content often took on a larger-than-life quality. Here too are the finest film reviewers on the contemporary scene, including Richard Schickel, Roger Ebert, and Manohla Dargis. Joining the full-time film writers are many distinguished American authors weighing in on a range of cinematic experiences, including Ralph Ellison, Susan Sontag, James Baldwin, Brendan Gill, and John Ashbery. Together they define an often underappreciated genre of American writing, a tradition filled with the "energy, passion, and analytical juice" that for Lopate mark the best in movie criticism. Phillip Lopate, editor, is an essayist, novelist, and poet, whose books include *Bachelorhood*; *Against Joie de Vivre*; *Portrait of My Body*; and *Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan*. He has edited *The Art of the Personal Essay* and, for The Library of America, *Writing New York: A Literary Anthology*. His selected film criticism appeared in *Totally Tenderly* and *Tragically*, and he currently serves on the selection committee of the New York Film Festival. The proceeds from the sale of this book will be used to support the mission of The Library of America, a nonprofit organization created in 1979 to preserve America's literary heritage by publishing and keeping permanently in print authoritative editions of America's best and most significant writing.

From the Back Cover
From *Birth of a Nation* to *Sideways*, 90 years of great writing that shaped how we think about the movies. "This provocative collection provides not only dozens of colorful close-ups of iconic movies but also a vivid panorama of modern times." A. SCOTT BERG "An on-the-spot history of the coming into being of a new narrative medium. The arc of this story, as traced by Phillip Lopate, is thrilling." JONATHAN LETHEM "With his deep knowledge of the medium, Phillip Lopate provides a tour of a century of film and the splendid writing it has inspired. Lopate, a gifted essayist, is an ideal guide to these riches." ROGER EBERT "Few books published this season will prove more absorbing." THE ATLANTIC