

Are Snakes Necessary? by Brian De Palma and Susan Lehman, Titan Books Press, 2020, 224 pp.

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood by Quentin Tarantino, Harper Perennial, 2021, 400 pp.

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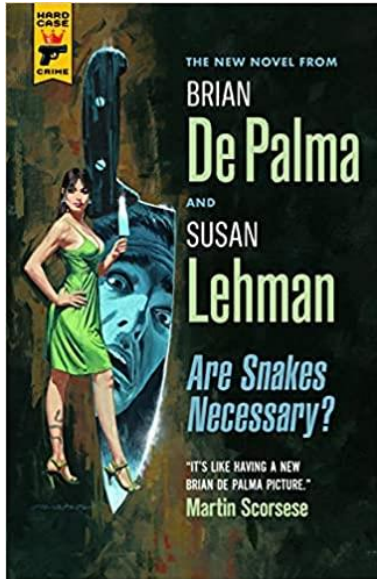
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BOOK REVIEW



Are Snakes Necessary?

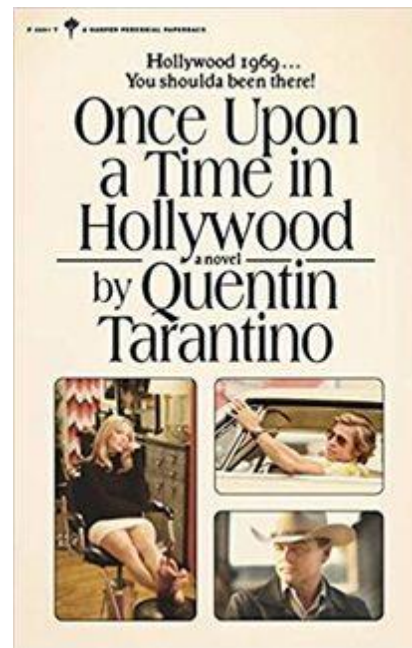
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Once Upon a Time in Hollywood

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400 pp.



“How Old Are You?”

Both Brian De Palma and Quentin Tarantino have recently written their first novels. In Tarantino’s case, the immediate reasoning is easy to discern: *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2021) is a novelization of *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood* (2019), and it largely elaborates on the film’s lore and characters in several intriguing ways. For De Palma, *Are Snakes Necessary?* (2020), co-written with former *New York Times* editor Susan Lehman, also a first-time novelist, is more curious. Its terse prose and bite-sized chapters (most run for only a few pages) suggest little of De Palma’s predilection for an elongated, set-piece-

driven visual grammar, given that long takes and dialogue-free sequences are a staple of his cinematic style. In fact, if the story elements didn't indicate something bordering on a parody of De Palma's narrative obsession with voyeurism, political corruption, and gullible male protagonists, it would be difficult to detect De Palma's authorial hand at all.

Each filmmaker has been taken to task at times for their questionable treatment of women as characters. It is worth noting, then, that both filmmakers are taking turns toward considering how Hollywood has historically treated women as dispensable. De Palma was arguably the central American filmmaker that feminist activists targeted in the 1980s, with picket lines and vitriol hurled in equal measure toward films such as *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Body Double* (1984). His works, like those of Alfred Hitchcock and Dario Argento before him, were thought by these activists to deliberately punish women, using them as victims to be carved up by, respectively, a razor-wielding psychopath and a driller-killer wielding psychopath. As Carol Clover and a host of other commentators have shown, these sorts of moral dismissals are shallow at best because they perceive a direct correlation between the cinematic image and reality. De Palma, being a formalist, uses genre, narrative, and plotting to stage acrobatic and operatic uses of the camera. Therefore, to boil De Palma's films down to their perceived misogyny is to overlook how cinema functions as a medium. The filmmaker is in the process of making a new film titled either *Predator* (no, not *that* one) or *Catch and Kill* depending on which news site you trust more, which is said to be "a horror film set in Hollywood and featuring a predatory movie mogul." Whatever De Palma is up to, it's difficult to see this development as anything other than a probable questioning of his own participation in the Hollywood machine, its consumptive nature, and why monsters like Harvey Weinstein were able to advance on their prey for so long before someone finally blew the whistle.

Tarantino's latest film, *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood* (2019), is set in 1969 and conducts a covert commentary on how the Hollywood machine takes female child stars, places them in prominent, but vulnerable positions of early stardom, and then snatches it away from them before they've turned twenty-five. The core characters in this regard are Trudi Fraser (Julia Butters), an eight-year-old "actor" (she claims the term "actress" is nonsensical), and Squeaky Fromme, played by former child star Dakota Fanning. Seeing Fanning as Fromme, dirt and sweat caking her face, recalls her earlier, controversial role in *Hounddog* (Deborah Kampmeier, 2007), in which she plays a pre-adolescent girl who is raped by an older boy. Critics complained that Fanning was too young for such a difficult role and that by even allowing her to play a victim of sexual

abuse, the film itself was tantamount to abuse. The matter of age and being of an appropriate age is, in fact, the underlying concern of Tarantino's film; not only does it plague Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio), who fears that he's getting too old to remain a leading man in Hollywood, but Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt) invokes it directly after picking up Pussycat (Margaret Qualley), asking her: "How old are you?" In this instance, it's a strict matter of legality; he goes on to say, "What I'm too old to do is go to jail for poontang."

The novelization retains these conversations in their entirety, though without Fanning giving a face to Fromme, the subtext of child stardom is lost. What takes its place, though, is an assortment of expansions that consider Hollywood as a space where ongoing discussions happen across generations, culminating in the final chapter, in which Rick and Trudi run lines together over the phone late at night. "Wow, Rick, isn't our job great? We're so lucky, ain't we?" she asks him. Rick responds: "Yes we are, Trudi. We're real lucky." While the film ends with the bloody retribution that's typical of Tarantino's filmography, the novel omits these events entirely and instead focuses on a small moment of agreement and graciousness shared between two co-workers. The age-gap implication of the conversation, though, is not lost on Tarantino, who has Rick say, "Trudi, you can't call me at this hour...it's *not* appropriate." In Tarantino's revised milieu, the interaction culminates not in endangerment, fear, or harm, but cooperation and camaraderie. The exchange revises an early encounter between the two, in which Rick calls her "Pumpkin Puss" as she consoles him. In the film, Tarantino shoots this moment in a series of low-and-high angle shot-reverse-shots, with the high-angle shots of Trudi, down on her knees in front of Rick, visually connoting the potential for a pedophilic gaze. Rick takes on a monstrous quality in this moment through blocking alone: he's physically placed in the subject position of a child molester. That Trudi forecloses that gaze by standing up and verbally correcting Rick's language ("I don't like names like 'Pumpkin Puss.' But since you're upset, we'll talk about that some other time.") indicates the emergence of a feminist perspective within the Baby Boomer generation, and one that will become a central component of 1970s New Hollywood, even as the majority of films will still be directed by men.

In 1969, De Palma was completing his third feature film, *The Wedding Party*, and was on his way to becoming a central figure within the New Hollywood. It wasn't until 1973, with *Sisters*, that De Palma turned the majority of his creative focus to Hitchcockian riffs on noirish plotlines, in which men, typically, become obsessed with the identity of a woman. *Are Snakes Necessary?* is in many respects a riff on a riff—it's De Palma lightly sending up himself and

his thematic preoccupations while still piecing together a fully formed thriller storyline. Take Nick Sculley, a thirtysomething photographer, who will play witness to high-level political corruption and, eventually, tragedy. Not only is his name nearly identical to Jake Scully, the protagonist of De Palma's *Body Double*, but his circumstances neatly parallel that of Jack (John Travolta) in *Blow Out* (1981). Other characters will seem familiar to anyone acquainted with De Palma's films; there's Fanny Cours, an 18-year-old intern and "political junkie" who is, as De Palma and Lehman write it, "in the full flush of carnality," and who recalls Liz Blake (Nancy Allen) in *Dressed to Kill* for how her seductive charm is irresistible to men. Add in a pair of murderous male political figures and a shadowy woman that's essentially a redux of Rebecca Romijn's character in De Palma's *Femme Fatale* (2002), and the ingredients for pulpy delight are afoot. The novel's primary drawback, though, is how the economical prose cannot rival De Palma's audio-visual acumen; in fact, even as prose, one longs for the wilder, stranger metaphors of Elmore Leonard, who has written nearly a dozen novels in a comparable register and with more aplomb.

Still, saying *Are Snakes Necessary?* isn't up to the level of the crime genre's maestro shouldn't suggest it's inferior within its own contexts. Indeed, as the novel winds toward a close, De Palma and Lehman find a dark and amusing means of quite literally cutting into the heart of the reader's pent-up desire to see the back cover's promise of "a female revenge story" fulfilled. It delivers the goods. What's more engaging from a broader perspective is considering why De Palma and Tarantino have written novels at all. In an interview with the website *Crime Reads*, De Palma explains that, "As a director I like photographing women more than I like photographing men. As a writer, I like focusing on the woman's point of view."¹ Though De Palma ends his commentary there, the implication is that prose affords the author the chance to consider perspective in a manner that the director, faced with the immediacy of the moving image, cannot. But for anyone who's seen De Palma's films, we should recall that, quite often, scenes unfold from the perspective of women, and often in ways that complicate questions of POV. The opening of *Dressed to Kill* is the most complex case, in which Kate Miller (Angie Dickinson) masturbates in the shower while looking at a man, presumably her husband, shaving in the mirror. Her sense of pleasure is mirrored, too, by the camera's scanning of her naked body, which, if we're talking gazes, is an explicitly erotic and objectifying one, not least because

¹ "Brian De Palma and Susan Lehman Talk Noir, Scandals, and Pulpy Cover Art," *Crime Reads*. <https://crimereads.com/brian-de-palma-and-susan-lehman-talk-noir-scandals-and-pulpy-cover-art/>

the character's body is glimpsed in close-up, absent her face (in fact, this is not Dickinson's body, but a body double). Therefore, we have an instance, sans dialogue, in which the sequencing of images thematize the matter of looking and, to put it another way, *seeing*. In many ways, the control of the image is tantamount to the entire premise of New Hollywood's divergence from classical Hollywood's "genius of the system," as André Bazin called it. The individual—the auteur—holds the capacity to create, to manipulate, and to puppeteer from outside the frame.

Rick's solution to aging into obscurity in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* is to work with then-burgeoning auteur Roman Polanski, a prospect that seems imminent by the film's end. Of course, in hindsight, Polanski's 1977 sexual-abuse case can't help but factor into a contemporary conversation about how men, as either directors or writers, are capable of communicating female presence and perspective. Tarantino was criticized during a Cannes press conference for not giving Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie) more screen time in the film; his response in the novelization is almost defiant, as the character is minimized further in favor of expanding Cliff's background, in particular, into a wife-killing, bloodthirsty cinephile. If that sounds ridiculous, leave it to Tarantino to give his stuntman a knack for cinema, with extended sections on Cliff's response to *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (Vilgot Sjöman, 1967) and taste for titles that now comprise the fulcrum for the Criterion Collection's non-English language selections. There's also an entire chapter devoted to Cliff's encounter with Aldo Ray in Spain, in which the stuntman gets the veteran actor drunk. It concludes with Rick chastising him, saying, "When they give you your SAG card at the fuckin' union office, they give you three rules: One, they gotta give you turnaround. Two, don't do any nonunion shoots. And three, if you ever do a film with Aldo Ray, under no circumstances give him a bottle." To what extent one finds this amusing likely depends on one's tolerance for Tarantino's own self-indulgent cinephilia, particularly the sort that imagines film-history-as-fan-fiction worthy of entire chapters. Nevertheless, it also cuts to the heart of what's at stake in both of these novels as it pertains to Tarantino and De Palma: as artists aging into their later years (Tarantino claims he'll make just one more film), they're paradoxically intrigued by the question of artistic evolution while also stubbornly resolute in their thematic obsessions and artistic perspectives.

In *The Card Counter*, Paul Schrader's latest film, the protagonist, a blackjack sharp who spent eight and a half years in military prison for his role as an Abu Gharib torturer, offers this response to his protégé, who questions if there's any meaning in the monotony of doing the same thing over and over again: "You just go around and around until you work things out." Schrader,

who wrote the screenplay for De Palma's *Obsession* (1976), might as well be speaking through his character in this moment, and in many respects he speaks for De Palma and Tarantino, too: their filmographies suggest slight variations on a theme, explored through repetition. Though Schrader hasn't written a novel, his films are explorations that spring, in large part, from an early critical work of his own called *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972). Like De Palma, nearly fifty years later, the themes remain the same. In writing their first novels, De Palma and Tarantino implicitly ask us to grapple with how time affects our perceptions of ourselves and of the past. Forget snakes; the real question for both of these writer/directors becomes: is change necessary?

— Clayton Dillard

Brian DePalma is the director of many films, including *Blow Out* and *Carrie*.

Susan Lehman is a former editor of the *New York Times* and author whose writing has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Vogue*, *The New Yorker* and *Spy magazine*.

Quentin Tarantino is the director of ten films, including *Jackie Brown* and *Death Proof*.

Clayton Dillard recently completed his PhD in English from Oklahoma State University. His dissertation focuses on non-realist aesthetic trends in contemporary European art cinema. He is currently working on multiple projects and proposals, including a monograph on Italian horror's relationship to 1970s American cinema.

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