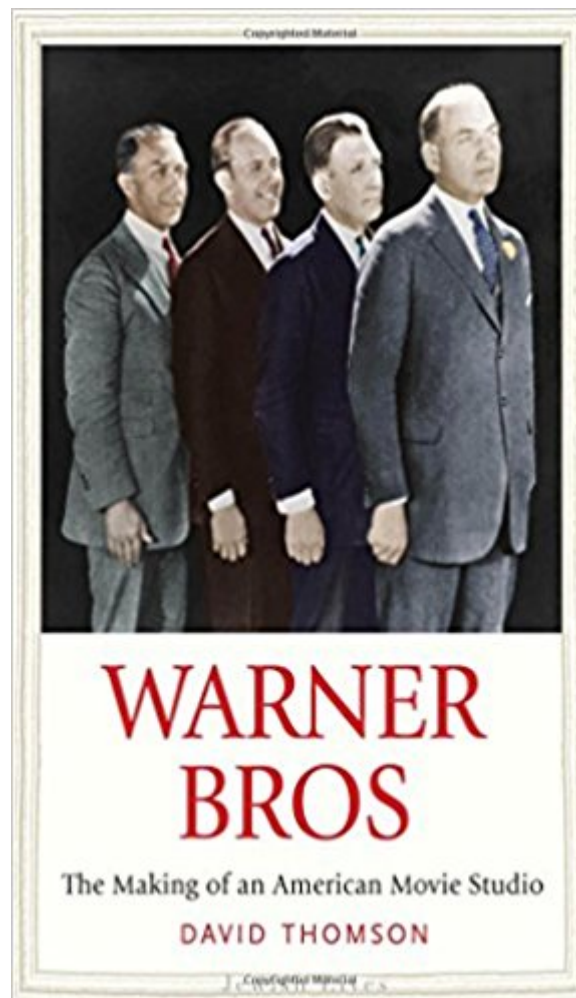




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# Warner Bros: The Making Of An American Movie Studio (Jewish Lives)



## Synopsis

Behind the scenes at the legendary Warner Brothers film studio, where four immigrant brothers transformed themselves into the moguls and masters of American fantasy, Warner Bros charts the rise of an unpromising film studio from its shaky beginnings in the early twentieth century through its ascent to the pinnacle of Hollywood influence and popularity. The Warner Brothers—Harry, Albert, Sam, and Jack—arrived in America as unschooled Jewish immigrants, yet they founded a studio that became the smartest, toughest, and most radical in all of Hollywood. As David Thomson provides fascinating and original interpretations of Warner Brothers pictures from the pioneering talkie *The Jazz Singer* through black-and-white musicals, gangster movies, and such dramatic romances as *Casablanca*, *East of Eden*, and *Bonnie and Clyde*. He recounts the storied exploits of the studio's larger-than-life stars, among them Al Jolson, James Cagney, Bette Davis, Errol Flynn, Humphrey Bogart, James Dean, Doris Day, and Bugs Bunny. The Warner brothers' cultural impact was so profound, Thomson writes, that their studio became "one of the enterprises that helped us see there might be an American dream out there."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Jack [Warner] is lucky to have a man who has brought a lifetime of sitting in theaters, shellacked by the beams of the projectionist's light, and who has thought so deeply and eccentrically and opinionatedly and ultimately so brilliantly about him. We, his readers, are lucky too."—Leslie

Epstein, Wall Street Journal" A masterful look at one of early Hollywood's preeminent families and the studio they built on their name. . . . Thomson is just as at home writing biography as he is chronicling the institutional history of the Warner Bros. studio. . . . Anything new from Thomson is worth taking notice of, and this book is no exception." • Publishers Weekly, Starred Review "An entertaining, well-documented history of the legendary studio for film scholars and fans alike." • Kirkus Reviews "I believe David Thomson to be one of the very best and most incisive writers on film. He has a poetic and dreamlike understanding of what films mean, but is precise in his observations. He presents a very, very high level of understanding in language that is not only accessible, but often witty and stunningly original." • Jeanine Basinger, author of *The Star Machine* "David Thomson writes about the cultural and historical significance of cinema with irreverent wit, deep knowledge and devotional lyricism. Warner Bros (the studio, the films, and the immigrant brothers themselves) becomes a fascinating lens through which to examine American identity." • Dana Spiotta, author of *Înnocents and Others* and *Eat the Document*

David Thomson is a film critic and historian, and the author of more than twenty books, including *The Biographical Dictionary of Film*, now in its sixth edition, and *Why Acting Matters*.

This book is in dire need of a good editor. The author wanders all over the place making it difficult to understand where he's going. I found myself having to reread sentences/paragraphs to figure out what the bloody point was. Very frustrating read. I fear the author's proximity to characters in this book produces a subjective, rambling dissertation of this period of Hollywood film making resulting in a not very structured, historical, social and psychological rendering of the people who were responsible for the filmmaking that affected and influenced our imaginations, minds and lives.

Breezy and entertaining, this collection of tales approximates a series of long, boozy dinners with a Hollywood insider willing to dish lots of great dirt and gossip. It's not a comprehensive history, by any means, and it's firmly stuck in the last century. But it's a quick read, and within its limited goals, a success.

David Thompson knows how to write. He has written a very entertaining book about four Jewish immigrant brothers from Youngstown, Ohio who make it in Hollywood and America. The book is a fitting edition to Yale's Jewish Lives series, despite it being a biography of a movie

studio rather than an individual. As with most of the early movie studios Warner Brothers evolves from operating theaters to running a major studio in Hollywood. Along the way we witness the sibling rivalry among the brothers mostly pitting the oldest, Harry against the youngest, Jack. Harry stays true to his religion and his wife, not so much for Jack. Ultimately Jack wins and sells the company out from the other brothers in the 1950s and then buys it back to become its sole owner. Harry dies of a stroke shortly thereafter. The real guts of the book is how Warner Bros evolved from making Rin Tin Tin movies in the early 1920s, to pioneering sound with Al Jolson's "Jazz Singer." From there we go on to the realistic gangster movies that brought us such stars as Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney. Warner Bros also brings us the great Busby Berkeley song and dance spectacles. In "Gold Diggers of 1933" Joan Blondell sings one of the two great anthems of the 1930s, "My Forgotten Man." The other anthem was "Brother Can You Spare a Dime." So if you add to the gangster movies, "Gold Diggers," "I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang," and "Petrified Forest" you get a real flavor of America in the 1930s. Because this is in the Jewish Lives series Thompson highlights the roles of such Jewish actors as Edward G. Robinson, Paul Muni, Peter Lorre and Lauren Bacall. Of course no book on Warner Brothers would be complete without a full discussion of "Casablanca," the best movie ever made that starred Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman and was directed by the Hungarian Jew Michael Curtiz. In a few short pages he takes us into the inside of making that movie. There is much more in book with vignettes on Bette Davis, Errol Flynn, Howard Hawks and Joan Crawford. My one minor quibble with the book is that Thompson throws in a few gratuitous comments about Donald Trump. Nevertheless it is a very enjoyable read.

David Thomson examines his words -- "the making of an American movie studio." He explains how and why Warner Bros had "unique impact on our cultural dreams, on us, that is alarming because it is enormous." Its impact was also unique in ways and to an extent unlike any other of the major studios from the mid-1920s through the 1960s. As Thomson explains, from the beginning, there were East/West conflicts of various kinds in which Harry and Jack were the principal antagonists. In 1958, Harry died of a cerebral occlusion. At his funeral, wife Rea observed, "Harry didn't die. Jack killed him." Jack died 20 years later after strokes had left him blind and helpless. "If there were

bodies left in the streets, there always had been in Warner pictures. I agree with him that Warners made most of the best gangster films (1931-1949). They include *The Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Petrified Forest* (1936), *High Sierra* (1941), *Key Largo* (1948), and *White Heat* (1949). Most of these films featured James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and/or Humphrey Bogart. Warner Bros also produced several films that won an Oscar for Best Film: *Life of Emile Zola* (1937), *Casablanca* (1943), *My Fair Lady* (1964), *Unforgiven* (1992), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), *The Departed* (2006), and *Argo* (2012). Other films produced elsewhere won an Oscar for Best Film and were distributed by Warner Bros (1932-1975). They include *Grand Hotel* (1932; *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1936), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *An American in Paris* (1951), *Around the World in 80 Days* (1957), *Ben Hur* (1959), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). The abundance of information and insights that Thomson provides enables his reader to "go behind the silver screen" or if you prefer, down a rabbit hole and into a culture of genius that is "collective as well as individual." Carl Sandburg once described Chicago as "America with the lid off" and the same be said of the Warners organization, roughly between 1927 and 1967. I am grateful to David Thomson for allowing me and countless others to explore a major film community that had such a "unique impact on our cultural dreams, on us, that is alarming because it is enormous." For four decades, Warner Bros illustrated the best and worst of the nation that attracted so many immigrants and it is also true that that same nation continues to illustrate today the best and worst of Warner Bros in its prime.

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