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Nora Ephron obituary

Screenwriter behind the hit movies *When Harry Met Sally* and *Sleepless in Seattle*

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Nora Ephron, who has died aged 71 after suffering from acute myeloid leukaemia, brought her sharp New Yorker wit, laced with a sentimental streak, to glossy Hollywood romantic comedies, with Oscar-nominated screenplays for *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), the second of which she also directed. They were the nearest and most successful attempts to revive the spirit of the sophisticated Katharine Hepburn/Spencer Tracy battle-of-the-sexes comedies of the 1950s, and the softer-edged Doris Day/Rock Hudson vehicles of the 1960s.

Ephron's parents, Henry and Phoebe Ephron, were also writers of romantic comedies - including *Desk Set* (1957) for Hepburn and Tracy - who based a 1961 Broadway play, *Take Her She's Mine*, on their daughter's rebellious college days. It was turned into a film two years later, with Sandra Dee in the role of the teenager. Later, Ephron would take elements from her own life and fashion them into screenplays that would typify the genre that became known as the romcom. Although she created strong female characters after her own image, they were never strident or domineering. They were simply the equal of men. But, on the whole, her journalism was much tougher and



Nora Ephron in 2010. Photograph: Charles Sykes/AP

funnier than the films, with Hollywood, as it usually does, managing to smooth out the sharp edges.

Ephron was born in Manhattan but brought up in Beverly Hills, California, the eldest of four daughters (her sisters, Delia, Hallie and Amy, all became writers too). She became interested in journalism at an early age, and wrote for the university newspaper at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, from which she graduated with a political science degree in 1962.

After working in the postroom of Newsweek in New York, and writing for a satirical magazine,

Ephron was taken on as a columnist on the New York Post. By then married to the writer Dan Greenburg, she made a name for herself on the Post, as well as Esquire and the New York Magazine, as the smartest journalist around, inviting comparisons with the humorist Dorothy Parker. She wrote about her love for cooking, New York and sex, in that order, putting a satirical slant on each subject.

In 1975 she met Carl Bernstein, the Washington Post reporter famed for his part in exposing the Watergate scandal, and they married the following year. The couple turned in a script for All the President's Men, the movie based on Watergate, which, according to Robert Redford, who was to be cast as Bernstein's colleague Bob Woodward, showed Bernstein "as the great lover hopping in and out of bed" and made Woodward appear dull. The script was dropped in favour of one by William Goldman, but Ephron got a taste for screenwriting.

Although she had already co-written a story with Greenburg for an episode of the television series Adam's Rib in 1973, a spin-off from the Tracy/Hepburn classic, her first solo effort was the script for a TV movie called Perfect Gentlemen (1978), starring Lauren Bacall.

She had to wait until 1983 for her first feature film, when her friend Mike Nichols asked her to write the screenplay (with Alice Arlen) for Silkwood, based on the life of Karen Silkwood, who died in suspicious circumstances while investigating abuses at a plutonium plant where she had worked. Something of a comeback for Nichols, who had not made a film for seven years, it concentrated on the daily life of its blue-collar heroine, finely portrayed by Meryl Streep as a small-town, chain-smoking Texan.

Streep starred, as Ephron's alter ego, in Heartburn (1986), also directed by Nichols, which charts the breakdown of a marriage destroyed by the infidelity of the husband (Jack Nicholson). It was based on Ephron's 1983 novel of the same name, a thinly disguised tragicomic chronicle of her marriage to Bernstein, which ended in 1980, after he had an affair. The publication resulted in Bernstein getting a court order to prevent Ephron from writing again about him or their two children. Despite Ephron having written the screenplay of the film, it lacked the caustic humour and subtle asides of the book, becoming too sour. Nevertheless, Ephron commented: "I highly recommend having Meryl Streep play you. If your husband is cheating on you with a carhop, get Meryl to play you. You will feel much better."

Cookie (1989), co-written by Ephron and Arlen, was not much of a success. Directed by Susan Seidleman, it was an unfunny story of a girl (Emily Lloyd) trying to keep her mobster father (Peter Falk) out of trouble. The New York Times reviewer called the movie "about as substantial as a weather report".

Ephron certainly needed a hit, and she got a whopper with her next film. When *Harry Met Sally*, directed by Rob Reiner, was a semi-autobiographical film based on the break-up of Reiner's marriage to the director Penny Marshall, when he found himself back in the dating game. Reiner entrusted the screenplay to Ephron, whose script was derived in large part from interviews with the director.

It starts with the meeting of Harry (Billy Crystal) and Sally (Meg Ryan), who pose the question: "Can men and women be friends or ... does the sex always get in the way?" As with all romantic comedies, the outcome is blissfully predictable, but only reached after a series of amusing ups and downs, illustrating the gulf between the sexes. The scene in which Sally demonstrates a fake orgasm in a restaurant quickly passed into the canon of memorable movie moments. Incidentally, the woman who utters the unforgettable riposte, "I'll have what she's having", was Reiner's mother.

When *Harry Met Sally* was followed by the buddy comedy *My Blue Heaven* (1990), directed by Herbert Ross, with Steve Martin and Rick Moranis. Its failure led Ephron to decide to direct her own screenplays in future. She knew from her parents' example how powerless screenwriters can be and that "one of the best things about directing movies, as opposed to merely writing them, is that there's no confusion about who's to blame: you are". Her first directorial effort was *This Is My Life* (1992), which she wrote with her sister Delia. An adaptation from a novel by Meg Wolitzer, it was about a stand-up comic (Julie Kavner) in conflict with her two daughters.

Ephron returned to hit territory with *Sleepless in Seattle*, an unashamedly old-fashioned romantic comedy which somehow worked for modern audiences. In Seattle, Tom Hanks is a lonely, insomniac widower pining for his wife while Ryan, in Baltimore, starts up a distant relationship with Hanks. For most of the film, Ephron keeps her two stars apart, a potentially dangerous tactic that works superbly. She also takes a chance by paying homage to Leo McCarey's 1957 remake weepy *An Affair to Remember*, which Hanks calls a "chick's movie".

A few years later, Ephron transplanted and updated one of the greatest of Hollywood comedies, Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), as an encore pairing for Hanks and Ryan called *You've Got Mail* (1998). It was a pleasant enough affair. Ryan and Hanks play New York singles having a fling via the internet, without realising that they already know and fiercely dislike each other. Making up for them not having been much on screen together in *Sleepless in Seattle*, Ephron utilised the obvious physical chemistry between the two stars.

Ephron's last film as director/screenwriter was the airy *Julie & Julia* (2009), with Streep as the celebrated TV chef Julia Child and Amy Adams as Julie Powell, a blogger who took on the challenge of cooking all the way through Child's book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*.

In her essays, collected in volumes including *Crazy Salad* (1975), *I Feel Bad About My Neck* (2006) and *I Remember Nothing* (2010), Ephron demonstrated a clear-eyed view of herself. She was a vibrant woman who refused to let her illness interfere with her social life. She is survived by her third husband, the author Nicholas Pileggi, whom she married in 1987, and by Jacob and Max, the sons from her marriage to Bernstein.

· Nora Ephron, journalist, screenwriter and film director, born 19 May 1941; died 26 June 2012

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