

28 QUOTATIONS



Ben Hecht

(1894-1964)

Ben Hecht never attended college and began as a violinist, circus acrobat and journalist, then came out of Chicago to become one of the best screenwriters in the history of Hollywood. Yet he was also a serious literary fiction writer. Above all, Hecht was prolific. His bibliography is amazingly long. He wrote 70-90 screenplays, 35 books and published a great many short stories in prestigious literary magazines such as *Little Review* and elite national magazines such as *Smart Set*. Two of his stories were selected for the *Best Short Stories* of 1915 and of 1922. He debuted auspiciously as a novelist with *Erik Dorn* in 1921, but Hollywood seduced him in 1926. With his frequent collaborator Charles MacArthur he wrote the hugely successful movie *The Front Page* in 1928. As a former reporter in Chicago, Hecht excelled at dramatic plots, fast action, and the speech of the common man--tough street talk and slang. Above all he became known for witty banter and rapid dialogue with characters talking over each other, increasing realism and dramatic intensity. His many screenplays include *Scarface*, *Twentieth Century*, *Gunga Din*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Spellbound*, and *Notorious*. He also contributed to the writing of many scripts for which he got no credit, such as *Gone with the Wind* and *The Sun Also Rises*. He was considered the best script doctor alive. He could work so fast he often got called in and paid a lot to rescue movies in production with rewrites. Like many serious writers Hecht wrote for the movies only to make easy money but then got hooked and died feeling bitter and frustrated at having sold out.

ORDER OF TOPICS: Hollywood, movies, producers, writing in Hollywood, rich and poor, newspapers, human illusion, the Internet, wisdom, love, modesty, God:

HOLLYWOOD

People's sex habits are as well known in Hollywood as their political opinions, and much less criticized.

In Hollywood, a starlet is the name for any woman under thirty who is not actively employed in a brothel.

We looked on hopheads, crooks and...on their bawdy ladies as members of a family among which we were privileged to move. There was no caste system, moral or social, in our manners.

In the court of the movie Owner, none criticized, none doubted. And none dare speak of art. In the Owner's mind art was a synonym for bankruptcy.

Much more frequent in Hollywood than the emergence of Cinderella is her sudden vanishing. At our parties, even in those glowing days, the clock was always striking twelve for someone at the height of greatness, and there was never a prince to fetch her back to the happy scene.

MOVIES

A movie is never any better than the stupidest man connected with it.

[Movies] have slipped into the American mind more misinformation in one evening than the Dark Ages could muster in a decade.

Movies are one of the bad habits that corrupted our century. Of their many sins, I offer as the worst their effect on the intellectual side of the nation. It is chiefly from that viewpoint I write of them—as an eruption of trash that has lamed the American mind and retarded Americans from becoming a cultured people.

Movies were seldom written. In 1921 they were yelled into existence in conferences that kept on going in saloons, brothels, and all-night poker games. Movie sets roared with arguments and organ music.

PRODUCERS

Producers were summoned out of literary nowhere and given a thousand scepters. It was like switching the roles of teacher and pupil in the fifth grade.

Ninety percent of the producers I have known were not bright. They were as slow-witted and unprofessional toward making up a story as stockbrokers might be, or bus drivers.

WRITING IN HOLLYWOOD

I'm a Hollywood writer, so I put on my sports jacket and take off my brain.

Writing a good movie brings a writer about as much fame as steering a bicycle.

The honors Hollywood has for the writer are as dubious as tissue-paper cufflinks.

Hollywood held this double lure for me, tremendous sums of money for work that required no more effort than a game of pinochle.

Most of my script-writing friends—I never had more than a handful—took eagerly to the bottle or the analyst's couch, filled their extravagant menages with threats of suicide, hurled themselves into hysterical amours. And some of them actually died in their forties and fifties. Among them were the witty Herman Mankiewicz and F. Scott Fitzgerald, the fine novelist.

RICH AND POOR

I know that a man who shows me his wealth is like the beggar who shows me his poverty; they are both looking for alms from me; the rich man for the alms of my envy, the poor man for the alms of my guilt.

NEWSPAPERS

Trying to determine what is going on in the world by reading newspapers is like trying to tell the time by watching the second hand of a clock.

HUMAN ILLUSION

Like the actor, authority has faith in false whiskers. But its deepest faith is the human illusion. People will hang on to illusion as eagerly as life itself.

THE INTERNET

Once you're online and you see its power, you never go back. What we want to make sure of is that the nation has 21st century infrastructure for information for low-income people.

WISDOM

In moderating, not satisfying desires, lies peace.

The only practical way yet discovered by the world for curing ills is to forget about them.

LOVE

Love is a hole in the heart.

The only place I felt at home was in your heart.

You were the only light that didn't go out on me.

Love is the magician that pulls man out of his own hat.

MODESTY

[Asked by the parents of his wife]: "Why didn't you tell us you were a Jew?"
"I was afraid you would think I was bragging."

GOD

A simple fact entered my head one day and put an end to my revolt against the Deity. It occurred to me that God was not engaged in corrupting the mind of man but in creating it...like my stooped and furry brothers, the apes, I am God's incomplete child. My groping brain no less than my little toe, is a mechanism in His evolution-busy hands.

