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# When Movies Mattered: Reviews From A Transformative Decade



## Synopsis

If you have ever wanted to dig around in the archives for that perfect Sunday afternoon DVD and first turned to a witty weekly column in the New York Times, then you are already familiar with one of our nation's premier film critics. If you love movies and the writers who engage them and just happen to have followed two of the highest circulating daily papers in the country, then you probably recognize the name of the intellectually dazzling writer who has been penning pieces on American and foreign films for over thirty years. And if you called the City of the Big Shoulders home in the 1970s or 1980s and relied on those trenchant, incisive reviews from the Chicago Reader and the Chicago Tribune to guide your moviegoing delight, then you know Dave Kehr. *When Movies Mattered* presents a wide-ranging and illuminating selection of Kehr's criticism from the Reader most of which is reprinted here for the first time including insightful discussions of film history and his controversial Top Ten lists. Long heralded by his peers for both his deep knowledge and incisive style, Kehr developed his approach to writing about film from the auteur criticism popular in the 1970s. Though Kehr's criticism has never lost its intellectual edge, it's still easily accessible to anyone who truly cares about movies. Never watered down and always razor sharp, it goes beyond wry observations to an acute examination of the particular stylistic qualities that define the work of individual directors and determine the meaning of individual films. From current releases to important revivals, from classical Hollywood to foreign fare, Kehr has kept us spellbound with his insightful critical commentaries. *When Movies Mattered* will secure his place among our very best writers about all things cinematic.

## Book Information

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: The University Of Chicago Press (April 15, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0226429415

ISBN-13: 978-0226429410

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.7 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #253,414 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #116 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment > Movies > Guides & Reviews](#) #740 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment >](#)

## Customer Reviews

"Dave Kehr is one of the most gifted film critics in America." (Roger Ebert)"Dave Kehr belongs in the pantheon of film critics who have been associated in one way or another with the city of Chicago. In fact, he's one of the best writers on film the country as a whole has ever produced. This collection of his work for the Chicago Reader constitutes an important act of cultural recovery, which provides insights into a crucial period of transition in the film industry. Not only a critic but also a public intellectual, Kehr teaches us about film style, calls attention to pictures that have received too little attention, and makes us care more about an art form. When *Movies Mattered* is a great pleasure." (James O. Naremore, author of *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*)"Kehr writes in a way that merges an enthusiasm for innovation with an exhaustive knowledge of film history. And it seems he's never lacked for bold opinions. . . . He might be right—which makes this collection all the more essential." (Film Comment)"Most people now know Kehr as writer of the weekly DVD column in the *New York Times*, a gig he's turned into an ongoing tutorial on film history. But that may change somewhat now that the University of Chicago (his alma mater) has anthologized 53 of his long reviews from the *Reader* (and one ringer from *Film Comment*) in the book *When Movies Mattered: Reviews From a Transformative Decade*. No one familiar with Kehr's writing will be surprised to learn that the pieces are informed, insightful, and eloquent. Having inherited his job at the paper, though, I probably value the book more than most people, not only for its content but for its example. If you have any interest in the embattled art of film criticism, this collection (by a writer who, incredibly, was still in his 20s or early 30s) offers many lessons quite apart from his examination of the films themselves." (J. R. Jones *Chicago Reader*)"When *Movies Mattered* is long overdue. . . . Kehr's enviable strength in his chosen mold is his exceptional attention to detail and evocative power of description."—Andrew Tracy, *Cinema Scope* (Andrew Tracy *Cinema Scope*)"This collection of criticism and lore deserves a place on every self-respecting cineaste's bookshelf."—Powells.com (Powells.com)"This is a cause for celebration, although the resulting party would drive other critics to drink out of jealousy rather than selflessness. [Kehr's] prose is patient and lucid, laying bare stylistic and thematic mechanisms with the graceful invisible style of one of his favored Hollywood auteurs." (MovieMorlocks.com (the official blog for TCM))

--This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Dave Kehr moved to the Chicago Tribune after leaving the Chicago Reader in 1986, and he was its principal film critic until late 1992, when he moved to New York. His work has appeared regularly in Film Comment, and he is a member of the National Society of Film Critics. He blogs at [www.davekehr.com](http://www.davekehr.com).

The title "When Movies Mattered" could be a jab at current films, or maybe it's just a way of justifying a collection of reviews from three to four decades ago. Do those movies still matter? This collection of reviews will help you decide. In an average of four pages per review, Dave Kehr dissects not only a movie but also the factors that went into making the film and any ties to related films or film makers. The magic is that he does this without pontificating. Which makes for reviews that are as easy to digest as they are fresh and informative. Dave Kehr, noted for his independence, manages to spark a kind of curiosity that plays better after all these years than, say, the quirkiness of Pauline Kael, who was reviewing for the New Yorker at the time the reviews in this collection were written. Do these old reviews still matter? Surprisingly little is stale in these pages even after all this time, as long as you care about what makes for a good film and what detracts from one. If you're ever tempted to sign up for a film class, see if Dave Kehr's teaching one. And if not, we at least have this book.

As anyone knows who has read either this book or his New York Times DVD column, Dave Kehr is a deeply learned critic of movies and their makers. Whether or not one agrees with his assessment of this or that movie or filmmaker, one never fails to learn some new perspective on filmmaking in general as well as his particular subject. If you care about real filmmaking subjects and ideas (which doesn't mean celebrity fluff, gossip, the Oscars, and the whole Hollywood game, though Hollywood has produced large numbers of wonderful, often unsung movies that Dave Kehr analyzes incisively), you should get busy reading this book -- and I mean right now. Anyone who has already read it should read it again...and again...

Dave Kehr compiled a selection of the movie reviews he wrote for the "Chicago Reader" and the "Chicago Tribune" between 1974 and 1986, a period he described as spawning the film generation and the alternative press. He believes that the internet's takeover of the alternative press has changed the way reviewers write about movies. Contemporary reviews in mainstream press still publish reviews in the reflective, intellectual style in the vein of Kehr's work, but movie reviews in the internet age have little time for the study of the movie, let alone for reflection and composition. Some

of the movies reviewed and collected here were serious documentaries or semi-documentaries - "Blaise Pascal" and "The Memory of Justice", but one need only read his review of "Dawn of the Dead" to appreciate how a movie that might be dismissed, if reviewed by today's reviewers as "mindless", brings to life a film that was about the dead idea of zombies. In "The Memory of Justice", a film about the Nuremberg trials, Kehr asked, "Should all all Americans who didn't resist Vietnam share in the guilt of the Germans who didn't resist the Nazis? If everyone is guilty, then everyone is innocent, and there is no justice in that." Are movies no longer made the way they were or have the movie goer's taste change so drastically in this new century to keep in line with the pace - rapid, vapid pace - of life? Or are we seeing the last of a breed of Kehrian reviewers? Don't watch another movie or read another review until you've read at least one review from this book.

A reference work and a delight by the best weekly film critic in America. His Times dvd column is, with Hoberman's departure from the Voice, the only one I read.

Mr. Kehr is a perceptive critic. I always be grateful for his very first article, on Jean Renoir. But with some films I think he sees too much, and uses excessively his imagination beyond the real thing.

Like other film critics before him, most notably Peter Bogdanovich, Dave Kehr has written a book about 1970s film - a decade that saw a fundamental (and long lasting) shift in the way movies were made. The book itself consists of reviews of films during this period up until 1986 as well as some longer essays; the one on Hitchcock is particularly good. I also enjoyed reading his Top Tens for the years he was at the Chicago Reader. Kehr's writing and analysis are excellent, especially his consideration of how the accountants took over Hollywood and made commercial success the bottom line at the expense of artistic integrity. This has extended beyond the studios to every aspect of the business, including reviews and reviewers; the rise of the internet has only exacerbated the problem. The range of films he writes about is also impressive, covering everything from art house favourites (though he clearly doesn't like Bergman!) to more mainstream/cult figures such as John Carpenter. I do have some criticisms. There's not a single mention of 'Apocalypse Now', in my opinion the best film made during the years he's writing about and profoundly relevant to the post-Vietnam period the book covers. He also asserts that Blake Edwards's '10' is superior to Woody Allen's 'Manhattan'. His reasoning is considered - but it failed to completely convince me. That aside, this is a worthy addition to the library of anyone interested in cinema during its most important and transformative decade.

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