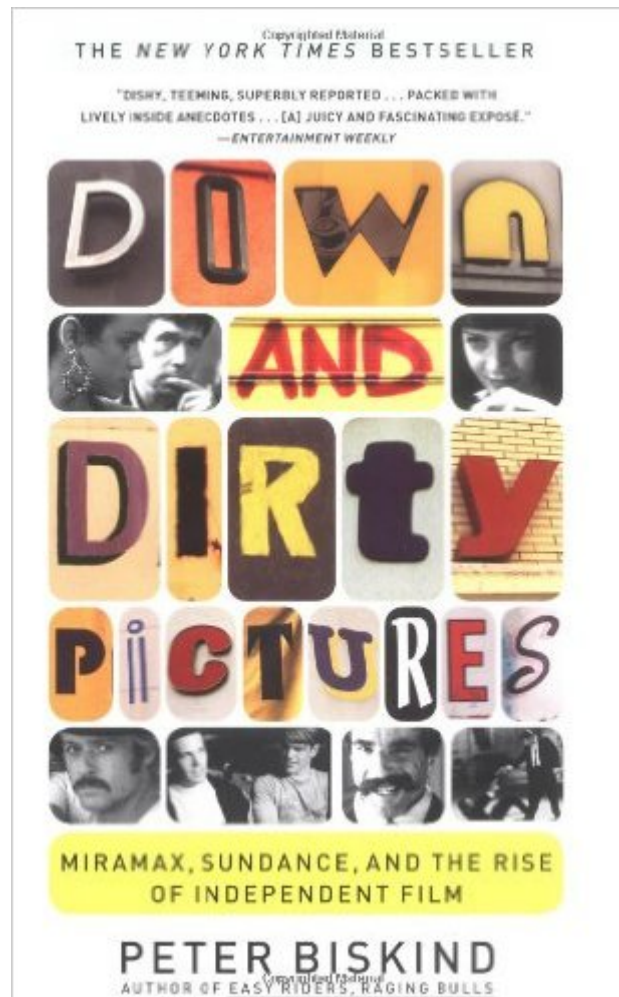


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Down And Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, And The Rise Of Independent Film



Synopsis

Down and Dirty Pictures chronicles the rise of independent filmmakers and of the twin engines -- the Sundance Film Festival and Miramax Films -- that have powered them. As he did in his acclaimed Easy Riders, Raging Bulls, Peter Biskind profiles the people who took the independent movement from obscurity to the Oscars, most notably Sundance founder Robert Redford and Harvey Weinstein, who with his brother, Bob, made Miramax an indie powerhouse. Today Sundance is the most important film festival this side of Cannes, and Miramax has become an industry giant. Likewise, the directors who emerged from the independent movement, such as Quentin Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh, and David O. Russell, are now among the best-known directors in Hollywood. Not to mention the actors who emerged with them, like Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, Ethan Hawke, and Uma Thurman. Candid, penetrating, and controversial, Down and Dirty Pictures is a must-read for anyone interested in the film world and where it's headed.

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Customer Reviews

Peter Biskind's last book, "Easy Riders, Raging Bulls," was a tremendously fun read; "Down and Dirty Pictures" is a sequel of sorts. Whereas "Easy Riders" traced the rise and fall of 1970s film auteurs (Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman), "Down and Dirty" examines the next wave of potentially great filmmakers - the independents of the 1990s. After a fallow period in films during the 1980s where bloated epics ruled the Oscars and vapid blockbusters predominated, the indies of the 1990s were welcome relief, and the story is quite interesting. Biskind commences his story in 1989 with "Sex, Lies, and Videotape" winning awards at Sundance and Cannes film festivals. Although a few

indie movies scored some success earlier in the 1980s, "Sex, Lies" marked a turning point whereby general audiences started to take these films more seriously. Of perhaps greater interest, Biskind argues that these indie directors are the direct descendants of the 1970s auteurs in that they also wrote and directed their films from their own personal vision, albeit on a more modest scale. His thesis is seemingly valid and helps place the rise of indie film into historical context. The book traces the ups and downs of a number of these directors, including Steven Soderbergh ("Sex, Lies"), Todd Haynes ("Safe"), Todd Solondz ("Happiness"), and of course wunderkind Quentin Tarantino. Their accounts are quirky and often compelling. However, the book focuses primarily on two figures - Miramax and Sundance. Harvey and Bob Weinstein are the ostensible stars here - as they found Miramax pictures, develop the career of Steven Soderbergh, and then make Tarantino the poster boy for indie film.

This book was written by Peter Biskind who was the executive editor of Premiere Magazine and is also the author of Easy Riders, Raging Bulls. It is a very readable history of the independent film business from its beginnings as sub-titled foreign movies in art houses to the development of American films made outside of the studio system. Central to this story is the rise of Miramax and the Sundance Institute, Festival and Channel. Sundance was formed to help new talent develop their projects and give advice on script development, shooting and editing problems. Miramax began as a marketing company. They and others helped some filmmakers complete and market a feature length movie. Also at this time other people from film schools developed feature length pictures using their own resources. Usually these pictures were made with the film makers own funds or funds borrowed from their friends or parents. Miramax a distributing company that bought films and released them in the United States began buying these pictures usually at the cost of production with a promise of back end participation if the film made money. Harvey and Bob Weinstein ran the company. Harvey would take a budding auteur's artistic vision and recut it to make it more commercial. This usually was done after first screening it before a preview audience and a sometimes bitter consultation with the artist. The result was that suddenly pictures which had no chance of recovering their production expenses began to turn a profit after Miramax bought the picture and bore the expense of post production, publicity and advertising. Miramax then took on the awards ceremonies spending the money and time to get nominations and awards for their most worthy actors, directors and pictures.

Peter Biskind's deft prose is on the scene once again even if his subject matter doesn't live up to his

classic work EASY RIDERS RAGING BULLS. The young maverick filmmakers of the 1970s make a decent parallel to the young maverick independents of the 1990s, the problem the author runs into is that today's directors lack the personalities of the old timers. Without the outrageousness of guys like Coppola, Evans, and Hopper, Biskind has to rely on the megalomania of Harvey Weinstein to carry the whole book, and it almost becomes his biography in the process. The story begins with Robert Redford's troubled Utah ski resort and his attempts to drive business to that remote location. At first, moving the U.S. film festival there does no good and Redford is ready to dump the whole enterprise after nearly ten years. Steven Soderbergh then puts the festival on the map with his inexpensive indie hit SEX, LIES AND VIDEOTAPE and suddenly Redford is a genius. Biskind goes on to show how poorly Soderbergh is treated by Redford from then on, even to the point of letting Soderbergh develop QUIZ SHOW only to step in and direct it himself. Redford is a selfish control freak, but Biskind cannot really develop this through the book, because Redford is so colorless that too many stories on him would put us to sleep. Instead Biskind uses Harvey Weinstein to keep us awake with his love of movies and bombastic style. Harvey is a throwback to the days before the EASY RIDERS when studio heads were tyrants and tyrants are always fun to read about even when they're horrible to work for. A few other characters are interesting for the short time they're profiled.

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