

Ann Harding ~ 22 Films



Born in Texas in 1902 and forsaking commerce for the theatre in 1921, by 1929 Ann Harding was an established Broadway lead. In that year she signed with Pathé (soon part of RKO) and through the mid-'30s starred in a series of soap operas, most typically as suffering heroines forced to make noble sacrifices for the men they love. With her ash-blond hair usually swept back into a bun, classical makeup-free good looks and deep, beautifully modulated voice, the patrician Harding brought a gentle, serene strength to such worthy star vehicles as *When Ladies Meet* (1933) and *The Life Of Vergie Winters* (1934) but fared less well in more faltering efforts such as *Devotion* (1931) and *Enchanted April* (1935). Ideal for the philosophical sophistication of playwright Phillip

Barry, Harding shone in fine adaptations of two of his most successful comedy-drama talkfests: *Holiday* (1930), for which she received a Best Actress Oscar nomination and *The Animal Kingdom* (1932). She made two of her strongest films late in her reign as a star: the haunting almost surreal love story *Peter Ibbetson* (1935, opposite Gary Cooper) and the taut suspense melodrama *Love From A Stranger* (1937, with Basil Rathbone). She continued to appear on film, stage and television until 1965 and died in 1981, aged 79.



With her favourite leading man, Leslie Howard

Moira Finnie talks to Ann Harding biographer Scott O'Brien

"Looking at Harding," wrote film historian Mick LaSalle in his book *Complicated Women* "is like looking into clear, deep water. Nothing stands in the way. No stylisation, no attitude, no posing. In fact, little about her technique could date her as a thirties actress." These are some of the words that inspired Scott O'Brien, author of *Ann Harding - Cinema's Gallant Lady* in his research into the career and life of actress Ann Harding (1902-1981). She left starkly different impressions on those who met her during the height of her Hollywood career. Laurence Olivier called her "an angel"; Henry Hathaway "an absolute bitch." Myrna Loy found her "a very private person, a wonderful actress completely without star temperament, but withdrawn." Ann Harding may not be as well remembered as actresses whose stellar careers extended well beyond the pre-Code era, such as Norma Shearer or Barbara Stanwyck. Her natural reserve

means that her name does not automatically come up when particularly saucy favourites of the period like Ruth Chatterton, Joan Blondell or Dorothy Mackail are discussed. Powerful icons whose last name conjures something singular, such as Garbo, Dietrich and West, are better remembered. In recent years, in large part because of the rediscovery of her early films on *Turner Classic Movies*, occasional revivals of her movies and the work done by film historians reassessing the pre-Code period, Harding has begun to captivate audiences again. Her lustrous beauty and surprisingly modern style of acting are only part of her appeal.

With the publication earlier this year of Scott O'Brien's biography, a balanced portrait of a skilled actress emerges, as well as some sense of the publicly guarded but privately intense woman behind her fame. Recently, I had a chance to ask the author of this meticulously researched and long overdue biography about his interest in this unique, transitional figure in American film. Perhaps, after reading this post, a few more people who have yet to discover her work will pause next time one of her rarely seen films, such as *Devotion* (1931), *The Animal Kingdom* (1932), *Double Harness* (1933), *When Ladies Meet* (1933), *The Flame Within* (1935) or *Peter Ibbetson* (1935) emerges from the vault. This often surprisingly modern actress may intrigue and touch you with her presence. You might find yourself unexpectedly enthralled.

Q: *What drew you to Ann Harding as a subject?*

As an actress, Ann Harding believed she had "an obligation to try to preserve the illusion of the profession." Ann also stated: "Whatever charm and dignity an actor may possess are ruined if delved into too deeply." Even so, I wanted to know more about her, to write her story, to preserve her legacy. I always found her to be an extraordinary talent. A biography is a vital step in the preservation of an artist's contribution to the world. Considering her beliefs, it is unlikely that Ann would have cooperated with my endeavour. For what it's worth, the biographies I have written on Kay Francis, Virginia Bruce and Ann Harding are about human beings, written with the intention to understand and appreciate their experience, not to sensationalise or exploit.

Before I began writing her biography, I expected Ann's personal life to mirror her screen image. As her co-star on stage, actor Robert Brown, pointed out, "Ann was a gentle, creative force." Ann had stated: "In playing a role, I get to intimately understand another's point of view. I learn that circumstances may alter cases - and, for the time being, to think as another thinks." For Ann to recognise this ability speaks well of her humanity, on screen and in her professional work. If Ann had applied this "intimate understanding" in her personal life, who knows how things would have turned out? It's a struggle we all deal with.

So who was Ann Harding?

Born Dorothy Walton Gatley in San Antonio, Texas in 1902, Ann Harding was the second daughter of a professional soldier, George G. Gatley, a graduate of West Point who became a Brigadier General. In the process of pursuing his military career, Dody (as Dorothy was called), her mother, Elizabeth (Bessie) Crabb Gatley, and her older sister, Edith, followed him to various outposts around the United States and Cuba, eventually settling in the New York City area.



Aside from some impressive efforts by the future actress in the part of Macduff (complete with kilt, horned helmet and walrus moustache) in a school production of *Macbeth* and a turn as a Theda Bara-style vamp in another production at school, acting was never openly discussed in the Gatley home as a possible career path. Harding began working in a clerical position for an insurance company after high school, supplementing her income by becoming a script reader for Long Island-based Famous Players-Lasky (the parent company for Paramount Pictures). At the age of eighteen, out of restless boredom or a need to break out of the pattern set by her circumstances, Ann followed an impulse toward performing. As she later wrote: "I had to have adventure!"

Harding responded to an ad in 1921 stating "Inexperienced Girl Wanted" that directing interested individuals to the Greenwich Village berth of the influential Provincetown Players. Looking for someone who was "young, spirited, and could convey a sense of midwestern pioneering stock and yellow, sun-

drenched cornfields" for a part in a play called *Inheritors* by Susan Glaspell, the management of the Players, especially director Jasper Deeter, were impressed by the grave teenage beauty who arrived at their door. Harding's Rapunzel-like blonde hair, low, distinct voice, and an unsettling concentration when listening to others persuaded them to add the girl to the cast, despite her lack of professional training and experience. Her debut, under the pseudonym of Ann Harding, a name that Dody Gatley had made up when she was ten years old, was well received. As new opportunities in the theatre world opened up for Ann, a break with her past that would set a lifelong pattern for the actress took place.

What were Ann's feelings about the military atmosphere in which she was raised?

Ann Harding once remarked: "Army life is a narrow prison cell for the soul of a woman. She must restrict her thoughts, fold her wings." Ann grew up to feel that she was at war with her father's generation. She stated that the traditions of General Gatley and the traditions of "the women of my generation, building new traditions, no longer in bondage," were at odds. In the truest sense Ann was rebelling and it was necessary for her growth and fulfilment. Ann's sister Edith recognised a "seething restlessness" in Ann which was assuaged by Ann's passion for horses. Riding horses grounded Ann during her late teens. In 1921, while stuck in New York City, Ann's restlessness became grounded in acting.

What was the response of Ann Harding's family to her becoming an actress?

Initially it was her father that turned his back on Ann when she decided to go on stage. He told her she had taken the "straight and inevitable road to Hell." Ann defended her position, left home, and wrote her father saying that she was "a producer and not a consumer of bread that was begrudged her. It is too bad that you have never had a daughter and that I have never had a father." A curtain of silence fell between them. "We were exactly alike," Ann admitted. "That was the trouble." [Father and daughter would remain estranged until just before the end of her father's life in 1931, when they reunited at his deathbed at the Presidio in San Francisco.]

While Harding often appeared to disregard the impact of her appearance (though I think she must have known how lovely she was), you make it clear that part of the reason for her early success was her singular beauty, particularly her unusually long, white blonde hair. Do you believe that she was aware of the effect of her looks on others?

It's funny. Ann's blonde hair was first thing I noticed about her. I was captivated by her looks while watching *Devotion* in the '60s. Of course, there was much,

much more beneath the surface for me to ponder. Ann Harding carried unusual depth as an actress. I couldn't forget her. And yes, Ann dealt with her hair issues as best she could. She sent a lock of her famous tresses to Broadway producer Daniel Frohman in 1921 with a note that read: "It is hair, not me, which you seem to want." Ravings about Ann's hair haunted her for years. By 1951, Ann lamented that people were "wailing" that she ought to cut it and look more fashionable. "I know how I'd look," said Ann, "and I'm not cutting my hair for anyone!" In public, though, Ann was certainly no diva. She never played the "star." Her face, free of make-up, was virtually unrecognisable on the street, where Ann wore what some columnist referred to as "dollar-day bargain dresses." "Only the poor and climbing have to dress up to impress," declared Ann.



How did the director of this first professional acting venture, Jasper Deeter, help to shape Ann's acting career and life?

In their first play together, *Inheritors* (1921), Ann balked at her character's defence of a conscientious objector. "I don't believe in slackers," Ann complained to Deeter. He stopped the rehearsal. "Deeter pulled back my blinders as an actress ... and as a person," Ann acknowledged. From that moment on, Ann's reverence for Deeter and what he stood for - the ability to lay bare a character's soul, and transport audiences into deeper understanding of the human experience, was her gauge. She measured her theatrical talent and success by what she had learned from her self-declared "Svengali", Jasper Deeter. I'm sure Deeter recognised that Ann's complexity as an individual

combined with her ability to subdue her "stubborn temperament" was the key to the humility and talent she brought to her art.

[Though Deeter's is a nearly forgotten name today, before he became Ann Harding's mentor, he had suggested to Eugene O'Neill that they cast a black actor in O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* and break the tradition of using a white actor in blackface. This idea was a real breakthrough for the American Theatre. In 1923 the idealistic Deeter founded The Hedgerow Theatre in Rose Valley, just outside Philadelphia, PA, to foster theatrical life based in art rather than the commercial requirements of Broadway. The non-profit repertory company became a touchstone in Harding's working life. She returned annually to work and recharge there. The Hedgerow (still in existence) became the most famous regional theatre company in the US, attracting an eclectic mix of actors, playwrights, technicians and designers to come to study and learn with Jasper Deeter. His stringent standards may not have been practical in commercial theatre, but Deeter's influence reverberated throughout the theatrical world. The playhouse helped to train figures such as actor Richard Basehart and playwright Edward Albee, as well as sustaining Harding's talent.]

Even though Harding received great praise from the critics and the public, she appears to have been, at best, ambivalent about her early successes in the theatre? Do you think she enjoyed this period in her life?

I believe she enjoyed the acting, but the grind, being on the road, the lousy living conditions, took their toll on her health. At one point in 1927 Ann was advised to convalesce at a sanatorium in the Catskills. She did, for several months. It wasn't an easy task to return to the theatre, but when Ann stepped on stage as the gold-digger in *The Trial Of Mary Dugan*, she had a smash hit on her hands that ran for two seasons.

[This scandalous, highly successful play about a rich man's mistress, a former show girl who may have murdered her benefactor, was made into a film starring Norma Shearer by MGM in 1929. Most observers who saw both productions regarded Bayard Veiller's play as the better of the two, noting that Harding's intelligent and sympathetic interpretation of the adult material made the experience a dramatic *tour de force*.]

In 1931 Ann stated: "My memories of the theatre are not pleasant - hard work, constant struggle and study, stuffy hotels, cold, ill health. Though not actively discontented then, I felt no firm ground." A film career meant having a permanent home, working in a new medium, living in a warm climate and a substantial salary. Yet, in spite of her memories of life on stage, Ann's real passion was the theatre. She stated that the highlight of her career was a 1936-7 English tour in George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*.

During this same period of intense work, Harding met and married a relatively obscure journeyman actor, Harry Bannister. He was not regarded as a particularly promising actor. What drew them together? How did the marriage affect Ann's life and acting career? How did having a child [Jane, born in 1928] affect Ann?

Ann stated that her relationship with Harry was simply a matter of "propinquity." She was managing a summer stock theatre in Detroit. Harry filled in as "leading man" when she needed a replacement. They both loved theatre, saw each other daily and Ann basked in Harry's sense of humour. Neither thought their marriage would last and were philosophical about it - at first. In 1929, Harry was on a tour in *Strange Interlude* which ended in Los Angeles. Ann took a brief respite from theatre work to enjoy some California sunshine. A friend at Pathé Studios coaxed the couple into doing a screen test. Ann was completely taken back by the lucrative contract they offered her. One could say that Harry, because of his stage tour, was indirectly responsible for Ann's screen career. Regardless, I think that Ann would have made it to the screen at some point. Valentino had approached her to play opposite him as early as 1924.

Initially, Ann was attracted to the California sunshine, having a real home and a lucrative studio contract, but she discovered soon enough that her film career put "life in a goldfish bowl." When Jane was five months old Ann declared that motherhood was "the greatest role." Ann was on tour in *The Trial Of Mary Dugan* at the time and she had taken Jane with her. By the time Jane was two, the motherhood vs. career question was readily answered by Ann: "It's silly to talk about choosing between the two when the obvious solution is to have both." "A warm relationship" between mother and daughter could describe these early years.

*Let's talk about Ann's film work. I think that I first noticed Ann Harding in the film *The Animal Kingdom* (1932), which was showing in a beat-up, grainy print on public television. Despite this, I was caught up in the film in part because she was a striking woman playing a genteel bohemian artist who was the long time mistress of a publisher (Leslie Howard). When he marries a more socially acceptable woman (Myrna Loy, in one of her early meanie roles) Howard tells Ann that he wishes to remain friends with her. Her gently rueful character, realising then how much she actually loved the man, decries her single state with the lines "A foolish virgin me. Oh, foolish anyway." She was such a different-looking woman for a movie made in the early 1930s. Her doll-like face and blonde tresses, usually worn caught up in a chignon at the nape of her neck (no Jazz Age bob for her!) also seemed to be in marked contrast to the behaviour of her characters in these early movies. Also I loved that her character, Daisy Sage, had some of Philip Barry's best lines and she delivered*

them with such a blend of humour and wisdom, especially: "For all our big talk, we both still belong to the animal kingdom." There was something indefinable about her - a quality that I would later hear described aptly in the movie Double Harness (1933) as "coolly virginal yet exquisitely inviting." When did you first become aware of Ann Harding as an actress?

I was fourteen. *Devotion* (1931) was on TV. I was spellbound by Ann's natural, un-actressy style. The warmth she generated on screen and her unique blonde looks captured my attention. A couple of years later I saw *Peter Ibbetson* (1935) and that nailed it. Ann's Duchess of Towers in that film was formidable and interesting. The way Ann moulded her portrayal allowed her character to soften graciously during her encounters with the mystical and subdued Ibbetson, played by Gary Cooper. This exquisite film has remained my favourite Harding film.

I find the level of romanticism in that movie to be extraordinary, with excellent performances from Gary Cooper, Harding, Ida Lupino and Donald Meek. Yet wasn't Peter Ibbetson, which was cited by Luis Buñuel and others as a masterpiece of surrealism, a difficult film to shoot?

Director Henry Hathaway was responsible for what many consider Ann's best film, *Peter Ibbetson*. He later bluntly referred to her as "an absolute bitch." It could well have been a compliment, as Hathaway was himself a self-declared "bastard." "To be a good director," he claimed, "you've got to be a bastard. I'm a bastard and I know it." Whatever dynamic fuelled the Hathaway-Harding relationship ... it worked. As one critic observed, Ann's performance in *Peter Ibbetson* was a "complete and attractive revelation of her art." During filming, Ann complained to Hathaway that she had difficulty relating to Gary Cooper. Hathaway explained that Cooper's technique only showed "on film." "It's a very strange quality ... this man has," he told her. "I would suggest that you watch yourself and not worry about him."

What movies would you recommend to anyone unfamiliar with Ann's work?

In order of preference, my favourites are *Holiday* (1930)*, *Peter Ibbetson* (1935), *When Ladies Meet* (1933), *Gallant Lady* (1933), *The Life Of Vergie Winters* (1934), *The Fountain* (1934), *Devotion* (1931), *The Animal Kingdom* (1932), *The Flame Within* (1935), *The Lady Consents* (1936), *Love From A Stranger* (1937) and *The Magnificent Yankee* (1950).

[* Harding's performance in *Holiday*, the first screen version of Philip Barry's play, was good enough to earn a Best Actress Oscar nomination. Since the 1938 remake with Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant, however, the earlier film is seldom shown.]

Between 1929 and 1935, Ann co-starred with Fredric March in Paris Bound, Ronald Colman in Condemned, Leslie Howard in Devotion and The Animal Kingdom, Laurence Olivier in Westward Passage, Brian Aherne in The Fountain, William Powell in Double Harness and Gary Cooper in Peter Ibbetson. Did she have a favourite screen partner?

Ann had a definite favourite in Leslie Howard. They had worked together on stage in *The Green Hat* (1925). Howard and Harding also made two films together: *Devotion* (1931) and *The Animal Kingdom* (1932). Howard had requested Ann to co-star with him in Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (1934). Ann made a big mistake by not taking this role. It could have well redefined her career like it did for Bette Davis. There was no reason for Ann to balk at playing a prostitute. She had done so quite successfully on Broadway in *A Woman Disputed* (1926). While in England in 1936, Ann commented on Leslie Howard, saying: "What a craftsman - he's an absolute challenge, with his perfect timing and the way he sustains everything and throws the ball right back every time. I think he's the finest actor we have."



Were there any actors that she preferred to avoid working with again?

Ann had privately referred to Conrad Nagel, her co-star in *East Lynne* (1931) as "an impossible stick" - but ended up co-starring with him again in the Broadway stage production of *Goodbye, My Fancy* in 1949. Ann also stated in a letter to Jasper Deeter that John Halliday, who played her husband in *Peter Ibbetson* was "one of the world's many worst actors."

Among the better directors Ann worked with were Henry Hathaway, William Wellman and Gregory La Cava. Did she learn much from them or did they challenge her to interpret her roles differently? Did she have a director with whom she established a rapport?

While they did argue, Ann was especially comfortable with director Edward H. Griffith. He was at the helm of her screen debut in *Paris Bound* (1929). Griffith was also behind camera for her successes in *Holiday* (1930) and *The Animal Kingdom* (1932). In October 1933, Ann and Griffith teamed up to get financing for the ill-fated *The Sun Also Rises*. Even though their work together in *Biography Of A Bachelor Girl* was considered a misfire, Griffith could easily be seen as Ann's personal favourite.

In *Gallant Lady* (1933), director Gregory La Cava encouraged a natural and radiant portrayal from Ann. It struck a chord in audiences and prompted RKO to put Ann in Louis Bromfield's *The Life Of Vergie Winters* (1933).

Ann also had a great deal of respect for Edmund Goulding, who directed her in his most personal film *The Flame Within* (1935). Goulding had read the script to her on the radiophone as she returned from Honolulu on an ocean liner. Ann was intrigued by the film's premise [the involvement of a female psychiatrist in her patients' lives, which threatens her happiness]. In spite of its perfunctory ending, the MGM production is a beautifully sustained film with sympathetic performances from Herbert Marshall and Harding.

How did Ann Harding's divorce affect her already ambivalent attitude toward stardom? Was she a bit naïve about what it meant to be in the public eye?

Ann absolutely hated being a celebrity. When she signed on with Pathé in 1929, she was naïve about what it meant to be a "movie star". After leaving Hollywood in 1936, she stated that it would take "an earthquake" to persuade her to accept another Hollywood film assignment. The divorce proceedings and ongoing custody battle were devoured by the press from 1932-37 - front page stuff. Yet while making her mark in Hollywood, Ann had waxed poetic about how "wonderful" Harry was. Reporters got tired of hearing her go on about how Harry was sacrificing his career to manage hers. Many felt Harry saw dollar signs when he latched onto Ann. Her success certainly provided him with lots of expensive "man toys" such as airplanes. By 1931, Ann had come to see through him - to recognise his lack of ambition and his limitations as an actor. After their divorce, Harry confessed that Ann told him she had "fallen out of love" with him.

Ann and Harry's custody battle [over their daughter Jane] went on for years. When doing my research I couldn't see how Ann could possibly concentrate on

making films. She was perpetually preparing for courtroom dates. There were threats of blackmail from Harry. The press hounded her wherever she went. I was amazed that she had any time or energy left over for an intense love affair, but she did. By the time she left for England in 1936, she was completely burned out. Emotionally distraught, she cut her ties with relatives, including her sister Edith and her family.

According to Ann's niece Dorothy, Ann had "a wonderful sense of humour." When Ann stopped speaking to her sister Edith (Dorothy's mother), it was a huge disappointment. "The last time I saw Aunt Dody was about 1935 ... before she went to England," Dorothy said. "It was a wrenching blow because I was her namesake and she was my godmother. I just had her right up there on a big pedestal. For a little girl it was exciting to have such a beautiful movie star as an aunt. Besides, she was very dear to me. She was very, very sweet. We had a nice relationship." In a letter to Jasper Deeter, Ann described Dorothy as "angelic".

Though very different in style and substance, Ann seemed to share a similar reserve, on film and off, with Greta Garbo. Both actresses seemed diffident and hostile to publicity but on-screen each could, with just a look, a sigh or a quiet word, suggest a character's full inner life. Do you think that it was a conscious decision by Harding to approach her work in the public eye in this manner?

As an actress, Harding believed she had "an obligation to try to preserve the illusion of the profession." Ann also stated: "Whatever charm and dignity an actor may possess are ruined if delved into too deeply." After her divorce from Harry Bannister, Ann signed on with Garbo's agent Harry Edington. Edington advised Ann, like he had Garbo, to remain silent and inaccessible to the press. He referred to this approach as "inverse publicity." Ann made a point of saying that her aloofness was her own idea. "After the divorce," she stated, "I decided that the only thing to do was not talk about anything." This "inverse publicity," which worked for Garbo, backfired on Ann. There was an underlying conspiracy among a select group of New York critics to tailspin Ann's career. Ann's "aloofness" fostered catty comments about her acting. Janet Beecher, who co-starred in *Gallant Lady*, raved to east coast reporters about how generous and cooperative Ann had been to her. "None of them would print a word of it," she told Los Angeles columnist Radie Harris. The "we'll-fix-her" attitude of critics contributed greatly to Ann's eventual disenchantment with Hollywood. Did she care? It was very clear that she did not relish being a celebrity. She felt it worked against being a true player of the theatrical arts. In 1934, she referred to the publicity that attaches to celebrity as "a disturbing guest."

After Pathé merged with RKO, how do you think Harding's contractual ties to that studio affected her career?

After Pathé sold out to RKO, Ann signed a more complex but lucrative contract. She balked at the contract's morality clause. "I have to lead a decent life," she scoffed. "I must work in any picture that my employer wants me to. I could be suspended for this or that." She signed after a few alterations. Temporary production chief Charles R. Rogers put Ann in the disaster *Prestige* (1932). It was so bad that she offered to buy and destroy the negative. When the Broadway lead in *Mourning Becomes Electra* was offered to Ann by Eugene O'Neill, the new head of RKO productions, David O. Selznick, refused to let her do the play in New York. Ann later complained: "It is a major tragedy of my professional life that I was deprived of that great opportunity." After her outburst over *Prestige* Ann conceded that she decided to become "docile" and do whatever RKO wanted. "I thought they were paying me for more than just a face to photograph and a voice to register," she commented. As her box-office sagged, RKO had the sense to loan her to MGM for the wonderful *When Ladies Meet* (1932). *Gallant Lady* at Fox also boosted Ann's popularity. After the "financially shaky" RKO saw revenues from that film roll in, they decided to put Ann in heart-wrenching "follow up" *The Life Of Vergie Winters* (1934), one of her best pictures. Of all Ann's RKO films, *Vergie Winters* made the biggest profit, despite being blacklisted by the Catholic Church.

The only other RKO films that made money were *Double Harness* (1933) and *The Lady Consents* (1936). Finding good stories was the real problem for Ann. When RKO bought the rights to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, it was set to be a Selznick production for Ann [as Lady Brett] and Leslie Howard [as Jake]. Censor king Joseph Breen bristled at the idea, but Ann would not give in. She spent over \$25,000 to buy the rights herself and approached Irving Thalberg at MGM. After learning that the Catholic Legion of Decency planned noisy boycotts, Breen lobbied to have the book banned from the screen forever. The MPA made a unanimous resolution that the film "should not be made at all." It was cinema's loss that Ann never realised her ambition to play the twice-divorced, smart, seductive Lady Brett Ashley, who refused to commit to any one man. The only public statement I found in reference to Ann's attitude toward the Production Code office was a comment from 1935: "Censorship is silly. How would newspapers like censorship? The public stays away from offensive films of its own accord." She had previously stated: "I don't tread on anyone's toes and I don't crave to dictate morals, manners and customs. I expect to be free from such supervision myself."

A few years prior to the establishment of the PCA, Ann was guest speaker at the Southern California Daughters of the American Revolution. Ann assured these ladies that she would raise the standards of motion pictures. Her contract, she said, gave her the right to "cut out lines that are objectionable to me." The organisation established Ann as their "ideal." When news of Ann and Harry's divorce hit the fan, these ladies were horrified.

I have the distinct impression that there are some lesser Harding movies that you would advise a viewer to avoid. Could you mention a few to steer clear of in exploring her work?

Mediocre films with good performances by Ann include *Prestige* (1932), *Westward Passage* (1932), *Witness Chair* (1936) and *The North Star* (1943). *Enchanted April* (1935) and *Christmas Eve* (1947) are fair films in which Ann's eccentric characterisations are decidedly off-key. *Her Private Affair* (1929) is completely unbearable. [*Her Private Affair* is the only film to pair Harding and her first husband, Harry Bannister. Ann's character is interesting because, though looking sweet, she is actually a rather unrepentant adulteress. But once the blackmail begins, the movie creaks rather badly.]

Did Ann's active support of the Screen Actors Guild as it struggled to become established in Hollywood and to help others during the worst years of the Great Depression affect her career?

Ann's work on behalf of SAG gained her the respect of fellow actors. She was the first female big name star to help move the organisation forward. Along with James Cagney and Eddie Cantor, Ann helped SAG gain clout and membership. Ann and Cantor caused quite a stir at SAG's initial protest meeting in the fall of 1933. After their speeches at Hollywood's El Capitan Theatre, over 500 actors joined the Guild. Cantor got President Roosevelt involved. Ann opened her home to a Washington official who met with Guild members for a secret investigation into unfair studio controls and practices. By the fall of 1934 Ann was 2nd Vice-President of SAG.

Was there a single incident that changed Ann's attitude toward the public side of being a film actor?

Ann's final appearance at The Hedgerow, her beloved repertory theatre in Rose Valley, Pennsylvania, was the real clincher. It was 1933. Ann was at the peak of her screen popularity. "People from all over came to Rose Valley to look at the 'movie star'," Ann complained. "They stormed the theatre. It was necessary to summon state troopers to take care of the traffic - an unheard-of thing in that peaceful community. I had unwittingly brought a disturbing guest with me - Spectacular Publicity." This incident really soured Ann on the "public side of being a film actor" - and the feeling stuck.

One of my favourite Harding-in-retirement stories comes from a fan who saw her the evening she attended a 1976 performance of *The Magnificent Yankee* at the Huntington Hartford Theatre in Los Angeles. She was in the lobby during intermission wearing a green suit with a fur piece. It was unmistakably Ann, hair style the same as ever. The devoted fan noticed Ann and approached her

with: "Aren't you Ann Harding?" But Ann wasn't having any of it. She responded with: "How ridiculous! What would Ann Harding be doing here?!?!" Other people recognised Ann as well, but she was not about to be cordial. The fan emphasised that he "still loved her anyway."

Did Ann and her daughter Jane have a warm relationship and remain close?

They were very close when Jane was small. However, things changed ... dramatically [causing a break in their relationship in the 1960s]. In my conversations with Jane's friends from the Bay Area, they concurred that as a mother Ann was perceived as "remote." After my book on Ann was published, I had the opportunity to talk to Ann's niece, Dorothy, and grand-niece, Faeylyn. In 2000, Faeylyn had a phone conversation with Jane, then living in Sante Fe. Jane was cold and bitter when the subject of Ann came up. "I had a terrible childhood," Jane told her. "I hated my nurse. I never saw mother. She was always busy."

In the late 1960s, Jane was approached by a magazine writer who was doing a "Where Are They Now?" article about Ann. He asked her: "Where is your mother?" Jane answered: "Well, if you don't know where she is, what makes you think I do?" At the time of Ann's death in 1981, Jane and Ann hadn't spoken for years. Jane Bannister died in 2005.

After leaving Hollywood, Harding ceased making movies for a period of time, beginning in 1937 when she married her second husband, orchestral conductor Werner Janssen, whose career was on an international scale. Was their marriage a happy partnership?

Ann and Werner's interest in each other began before she left for England in 1936. (At the time, Janssen was married and had two teenage children.) Classical music was a life-long passion for Ann. She was adept at playing the piano and completely taken with Werner's talent as a conductor. Following their marriage, Ann relished her new role as conductor's wife, stating, "I'm living in a new world. His career is of much more importance than mine." After her 1938 west coast tour in Shaw's *Candida*, Ann was happy to accompany Janssen for his second season with the Baltimore Symphony. "I'm tired of reaching for movie plums," Ann told reporters, again asserting that it would take an "earthquake" before she would ever make another film. Was their marriage happy? When I talked with actor Robert Brown, who co-starred with Ann in a 1955 stage production of *The Corn Is Green*, he observed: "There's something about a conductor ... I think Werner wanted to run the show." It is difficult to imagine Ann Harding being acquiescent, but when she divorced Werner (the couple separated in 1961) she stated in court: "It never occurred to me to fail to accede to his wishes."

Despite her emotional setbacks and commitment to her new husband, Harding did eventually return to films when she appeared in Eyes In The Night (1942) and she had a series of often undemanding roles in that period. Did she have any good roles offered to her in the '40s or was she taking the work primarily for the income?

At \$4,166 per week for six weeks, Ann gladly took on the role of Marjorie Merriweather Post Davies (mother of Dina Merrill) for the propaganda piece *Mission To Moscow* (1943). As the wife of Russian ambassador Davies, played by Walter Huston, Ann didn't have much to do on screen, and admitted: "I say 'How do you do?' a great many times. I'm trying to use different inflections on it ... Mr. Huston and I don't have much to do." Her appearance in *The North Star* (1943) was really a waste of her talent.

I think Ann was so disappointed after her potential MGM assignment to co-star with Spencer Tracy in *The Yearling* fell through that she took whatever was offered her. Ann was all set to play the lead opposite Paul Lukas in *Watch On The Rhine* (1943) until Bette Davis got wind of it. That was the final blow. Ann had only one strong role after 1937 [as Fanny Bowditch Holmes] in the touching and intimate *The Magnificent Yankee* (1950). Between 1950 and 1965, she made approximately 44 appearances on TV. From some of her letters, I gather she took assignments for the money. Ann didn't care for "live" TV. She stated: "That glazed look you see in the eyes of actors on 'live' TV is not histrionic emotion but inner panic."

Ann could be tough on television producers. When I wrote to actor Peter Mark Richmond about working with Ann, he replied: "Ann was of the old school in manner and work habits and I respected that. She was also strong when she had to be. She didn't like the man who was playing her husband [in *Playwrights '56* "The Center of the Maze"] and was responsible for getting him fired." Ann asked for George Brent as replacement, but didn't get her wish - she finally accepted Russell Hicks. My favourite TV performance of those I was able to locate was an adaptation of Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* (re-titled "Jury Of Her Peers") for *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* in 1961.

Before Ann passed away in 1981 she made a diligent attempt to contact her estranged sister Edith to make amends. "She went through all the Mackenzies in California trying to find her," Edith's granddaughter Faeylyn told me. "When she couldn't, she called Irene Dunne." [Edith was Dunne's secretary / book-keeper for many years.] "Irene Dunne was just too busy being Irene Dunne to help. She just couldn't be bothered." It is likely that Ann, whose ability to "understand another's point of view" while playing a role, had at last found the capacity to include her own family members in this equation - a commendable accomplishment for a headstrong individual.

Reproduced below, is a letter dated 15 November 2010 from Ann's namesake and niece, Dorothy Nash Wager. When Dorothy learned that Ann had tried to contact Edith near the end of her life, it meant a great deal to her. "After years and years of their not having any discourse," said Dorothy, "tears came to my eyes, because I was so happy and relieved to think that that happened. Aunt Dody must have undergone quite a change with regard to her relationship with my mother and wanted to get in touch with her. I wish my mother had known that." Dorothy's message is priceless in its ability to "capture" the real Ann Harding. I've always felt that, through a child's eyes, one can tap into the true nature of an individual. From ages 7-13, Dorothy "connected" to Ann in the truest sense of the word. Ann was an intimate part of her world.

Dear Scott

I am more than happy to recall events in my childhood in relationship with my Aunt Dody, better known as Ann Harding. First, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your outstanding book, in which you documented her meteoric rise to stardom in the thirties, and the balance of her career and life.

My family moved from New York to California in 1930, at her invitation so my father could manage her finances. It was a momentous time for my sister Barbara and me. The train trip, all the sights and sounds, the extraordinary differences of the East Coast vs. the West. For me it was a chance to see my little cousin, Jane, but most of all, my aunt for whom I was named and my Godmother. The days at my aunt's home were a delight, playing with Jane, swimming and wandering about the hillside.

When I lived with her and Jane for a time, my aunt invited Bonita Granville to come swim with Jane and me. Bonita was about my age and a lovely chum, and she showed me how to dive off the diving board which was a big event for me. Although Aunt Dody was gone most of the day, as soon as she'd come home, we'd all gather in the living room to talk over the events of the day. At all times she was interested in what had happened, and was very loving with us.

My fondest memories of Aunt Dody are small things, really. Watching her brush her hair and then twist it into that bun was an astonishing sight. She was so fast at it, I could hardly believe my eyes. After she'd wash her hair, she'd sit out on the patio and read while the sun dried it. Another favourite memory of mine is how she'd tuck herself away in her small den downstairs. There was a piano and a chair with a writing desk where she spent some of her

free hours writing. She also enjoyed playing the piano, gardening, swimming, tennis and crocheting.

I think that my aunt's first love was music. By the age of two, she'd learned to play a song on the piano my grandmother had written for the girls. Aunt Dody sang Gilbert and Sullivan songs while she was crocheting - she taught me several of them, and how to harmonise. We'd have the most fun singing Chippy-chippy-chopper-on-a-big-black-block. She had a wonderful sound system - music played throughout the entire house. The record player was behind the piano in a little cabinet built into the wall. We listened to the radio, too, but mostly records - Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, Wagner. She gave me several books on music and her greatest gift to me was the appreciation of it.

I was almost in my aunt's movie, Westward Passage, in the role of her daughter. Costumes had been made, and the first day of filming was upon us, but the weather was terrible, holding up the production. Sir Laurence Olivier was the dearest man, and even danced with me as we waited for the weather to clear, but it never did. The next day Aunt Dody came home and called me into the living room. She sat next to me on the couch, and tenderly let me know that I wouldn't be in the movie after all. The mother of a young actress had complained of nepotism. The silver lining was that my chum Bonita got the role, and that took the sting out of it.

My favourite movies were Biography Of A Bachelor Girl and Peter Ibbetson. I loved them for different reasons. In Biography Of A Bachelor Girl, it was fun to see Aunt Dody's comical side, which we always saw at home. She was so funny she'd have all of us in stitches - Jane, Fong the butler and me. Peter Ibbetson is such a beautiful story and the especially wonderful spark in her eyes that I recall so dearly is eminently present.

Recalling the words my mother wrote of her sister's devotion to her art - that she was essentially a pilgrim in her great humility and reverence, seeking what every artist must have - love of work for the work itself. She approached everything with the same brilliant life force. Ann Harding was a remarkable actress, a wonderful person, a loving aunt. Thank you for keeping her spirit alive.

Sincerely

Dorothy Nash Wager



Appreciation of Ann's legacy continues to grow among those who have discovered her work through TCM or in books such as Scott's biography and Mick LaSalle's book, Complicated Women. Near the end of our conversation, Scott O'Brien said the following about his hopes for the future appreciation of this actress:

Harding has become a standout in recent years due to visibility of her pre-Code work ... Now if only TCM can pay homage to Ann as Star of the Month (and include a good print of 1930's *Holiday* in that tribute), more people can discover Ann Harding, the "overlooked master."

Moira Finnie, 8 December 2010

* * * * *

PARIS BOUND (1929)



In her first film, the screen adaptation of a Philip Barry play, Harding shows herself to be a sensitive and capable actress. Playing opposite Fredric March (above), she acquits herself well, though the piece's message, insistently delivered - that a husband's infidelity is, of itself, not reason enough to call time on a marriage - must have stuck in her throat. Her father-in-law spells it out plainest. Speaking to his ex-wife, he says: "You made a failure of our marriage. I may have committed infidelity but you committed divorce. You did me out of my marriage and home. You destroyed a spiritual relationship that belonged only to us." Women's Lib? Who needs it? 76 minutes.

IMDb: Dated, stagy and suffering from a static camera, this early Philip Barry play still manages to pack a wallop due to Barry's wonderful dialogue and the strengths of March and Harding / The thesis of the film is that infidelity shouldn't matter because in truth it doesn't even matter to the person committing it / Harding, quite natural and at ease, is just wonderful in her first film. March is also very good. Together they avoid the stagy acting and over-pronunciation that mars other early talkies. Ilka Chase, also making her film debut, takes the honours among the supporting cast / The attractive leads, both highly accomplished actors, are the reason for seeing this, but the plot, such as it is, is well past its use-by date / A pre-Code film with strange moral sensibilities likely to shock most viewers today and an ending that leaves its message unclear.

HER PRIVATE AFFAIR (1929)



Another peer back through the murky mists of time for another play, this time *The Right To Kill* by Leo Urvantsov, brought to the screen in (considering its vintage) good shape. Scott O'Brien's assessment (he calls the film "completely unbearable" - see page 14 above) is unduly harsh. Playing opposite her husband Harry Bannister (above, left) in just her second cinematic role, Harding is again fully effective. He, in the couple's only shared screen venture, holds his end up too. Elmer Ballard (above, right, as Grimm) also impresses. The story, set in an unnamed Austrian city, concerns the death by shooting of a blackmailer and its ramifications. The piece's last line - "Gone and forgotten" - describes succinctly the fate of this commendable little obscurity, which is a pity. 71 minutes.

IMDb: A very talkative piece with little action or camera movement that mostly provides a vehicle for the star actress to show off. This was Ann Harding's second film and she is not quite as sure of herself as she would quickly be in Hollywood, tending to overact at times. She remains the only reason for seeing this forgettable film. She is radiant as ever, and even though neither the film nor the performance add up to much, Ann is always a treat for the eyes / Interesting in spots but not anything to stay up nights to see, unless you are an Ann Harding fan / The players move and speak naturally but there is little depth in the performances. Worth watching for its historical value only / I found most of the dialogue and the plot engaging. I was taken in by the old-fashioned filming of this 71 minute film. The ending was particularly nice and complex as, in a very short time, everything comes crashing down on Vera and is then satisfactorily resolved. Harding is radiant. Incidentally, a better movie based on the same story (with some differences) is *Evelyn Prentice* (1934), starring William Powell and Myrna Loy / It's rather obvious how everything is going to play out, although I'll give the film some credit for throwing in a nice little twist at the end. As far as the performances go, they're all rather bland and that includes Harding, who is all over the place / I think, had the film been made just a year or two later, it would have been a lot better / The unintentionally ludicrous first act is so fascinating, you wonder if script (risible), acting (mummified) and direction (plodding) can possibly get any worse. They do! The players seem to be unaware they are speaking a lot of rot / Yes, the movie is static and talky, just the way a lot of movies were back in 1929, but Ann stands out like a beacon, not only with her beauty but also her quite natural acting ability.

HOLIDAY (1930)



Harding's fourth film and second of three Barry play adaptations (see also *Paris Bound* and *The Animal Kingdom*), scored the only Academy Award nomination of her career. (Marie Dressler took the statuette). The theme is a familiar one: the clash of wills between a bohemian free spirit (Robert Ames, above, left) and a wealthy hidebound conformist, with Harding, while allied to the second, rooting quietly but earnestly for the first. A 1938 remake with Cary Grant and Kate Hepburn in the lead roles is rather better known than this earlier version, but while Grant outmugs Ames, who died in 1931, Harding's glamour cannot be eclipsed by anyone. Incidentally, the wonderful Edward Everett Horton (third left above) plays eccentric Nick Potter in both films. 91 minutes. Good.

IMDb: *Holiday* is a wonderful, sparkling movie and Ann Harding is glorious in it. A huge hit, it cemented her image as a shimmering, radiant beauty, always well bred but with distinctive views of life and love. Mary Astor recalled that Ann "was one of the first stars who disregarded her status on the set. She wore little or no make up and would not put up with special treatment, special chairs etc." / Harding's performance as Linda is vibrant, natural and completely beguiling / 1930 or 1938? Here's an idea - see both / Harding is fabulous in the part of Linda, but another pleasure is Mary Astor's excellent portrayal of Julia. She takes a rather blah and unrewarding role and really makes something of it / What the first film has over the second is Ann Harding. She's so lovely and her playing has a stillness, a contemplation to it; she seems to think very hard about what to say before she says it. It lends a certain gravitas to what is already a fairly serious comedy dealing with rather large issues / Highly recommended.

DEVOTION (1931)



This luminously photographed tale of crossed love simmers without ever quite coming to the boil, though it ends charmingly and no time spent in the company of Leslie Howard (above) and Harding is entirely wasted. 62 years before *Mrs. Doubtfire*, she establishes herself *in cognito* in his household as governess of his son. The rival suitor / painter is played in his penultimate film before untimely death by Robert Williams (see also *Rebound* with Myrna Loy and *Platinum Blonde* with Jean Harlow). Not bad, though Howard-Harding #2 *The Animal Kingdom* is much better. 73 minutes.

IMDb: In *Devotion*, Howard is a lawyer loved by Ann Harding from afar. Yes, the plot plays out a little like a Mills and Boon novel, but in such a charming manner that the viewer can just sit back and enjoy! / The lightest of trifles, with some lapses of logic - but was there ever a greater year for clothes than 1931? An enjoyable movie if you can suspend belief that Harding could disguise herself as an older woman. She was too youthful and pretty / A charming, sweet, sometimes clever love story. An assortment of great old character actors brighten the film with some earthiness before it floats away with ethereal Ann's delicate manner and beauty. One of the charms of a Harding film is looking at her shimmering blonde coif. Here it's hidden half the time - but she is quite wonderful. The storyline's emotional charge is sweet, heartfelt and reminds us of the lost innocence of early cinema / What a bore. Every bit the "creaky early talkie" with a soundtrack full of dead air and awkward silences. A chore to sit through, redeemed only to Robert Williams' naturalistic acting, which practically jumps off the screen. Sadly, peritonitis following appendicitis did him in like Valentino / Harding is always a pleasure to watch, even if she doesn't quite convince in either of her British (Mayfair and Cockney) accents / A nice film, but why is it called *Devotion*?

Two contemporary reviews:

(1) *Devotion ... succeeds in being quite a pleasing entertainment, owing principally to the excellent cast, headed by the radiant and talented Ann Harding, and to Robert Milton's competent direction. In this Cinderella-like story ... Mr. Howard rivals Miss Harding in acting, the portrayals of both being gratifyingly restrained and agreeably sympathetic.*¹

(2) *Every one of the actors, down to the last bell-hop and taxicab driver, gives an extra fine performance. It is one of the best acted pictures we have ever seen. Leslie Howard is exceptionally good.*²

[*THE ANIMAL KINGDOM* \(aka *The Woman In His House*\) \(1932\)](#)



Stage drama *The Animal Kingdom*, written by Philip Barry and starring Leslie Howard (above, who also co-produced) ran for 183 performances at Broadway's Broadhurst Theatre through the first half of 1932 before being filmed by RKO as *The Woman In His House*. Along with Howard, William Gargan, playing ex-pug butler Red, and Ilka Chase, as Grace, also reprised their stage roles on screen. Howard and Gargan were close friends and, as with Bogart when *The Petrified Forest* came to be filmed, Howard used his clout to his friend's advantage - which, in this case, is a shame because Gargan's limited acting skills impact negatively on the whole. In marked contrast, female leads Ann Harding and Myrna Loy are both very good, as is the tale of games that are played, of traps that are set, of restlessness and dissatisfaction with love, with

work, with art, with life. Howard's Connecticut-based publisher Tom loves free-thinking artist Daisy, but only comes the hard way to know it. This was the third Barry play adaptation (after *Paris Bound* and *Holiday*) to star Ann Harding. 85 minutes. Recommended.

IMDb: A sparkling film examining character and intelligence, motives and integrity, the artist's life versus the conventional life. It is a love story which depicts love and friendship on many levels. This film is one of those interesting ones where the viewer has to be able to listen to dialogue and interpret meaning. There are subtle interactions between the characters and a civilised, low-key ambiance / The story hasn't aged one bit. Howard is brilliant / Surprisingly honest and frank / I enjoyed the movie, but I'm surprised that so many seem not to notice how shallow and stupid its ideas are / A super film, quite shocking even for the time. The ending was also in keeping with the pre-Code code. Entertaining, intelligent and heartily recommended / Interesting story, good cast, enjoyable watch / There is a uniqueness in this film's open attitude towards love and friendship and how to piece them together that I have not often seen / Harding's performance is very honest ... Loy, absolutely ravishing, essays the part of the glam wife beautifully. Howard is handsome and thoughtful in the lead. Very good.

The Animal Kingdom was a particularly significant picture all round. As a production, it was a masterpiece. As an opportunity for the various players in it, it was one of the most outstanding pictures for many a year. It did much to persuade Leslie Howard to remain on in talkies. It encouraged Ann Harding after a number of not-too-good roles. It gave William Gargan a fine break (and started a warm friendship between him and Leslie). And it changed Myrna Loy's whole career, for she was on the point of saying goodbye to Hollywood, in complete despair of ever getting anywhere. She has never looked back since that production.³

Three contemporary reviews:

(1) *If The Animal Kingdom leaves something to be desired in the way of imaginative camera work, in the way of a departure from the technique of the stage, it remains nevertheless a creditable photoplay, retaining the best features of the gifted Philip Barry. It is flawlessly acted, thanks to the fine work of Mr. Howard, Miss Harding, Mr. Gargan and Myrna Loy, who, we almost forgot to tell you, plays the role of the conscientious but unsuccessful wife.⁴*

(2) *The screen of the RKO Roxy gives to many of the admirably photographed scenes a sense of depth and the vocal delivery is excellent. Never has Mr. Howard been seen to better advantage, for having acted so long in the play, he was well at home in the part of Tom Collier ... Miss Harding has the role of Daisy, which she plays agreeably enough, but not always with the spontaneity one would wish. Her beauty, however, atones for her somewhat too placid performance ... Director Edward Griffith keeps the story flowing interestingly,*

*although occasionally he is a little too fond of close-ups and of abrupt entries. Yet the incidents glide along nicely without any muddling ... Another player who does a capital work is Miss Loy as Cecelia. She speaks her lines nicely and suits the action to the words and some of her best scenes are with Mr. Howard ... It is a picture in which the playwright's ideas have been adhered to faithfully. It has the subtlety and restraint of the stage work and the settings are always in good taste.*⁵

*(3) Leslie Howard and Ann Harding are so perfectly cast that you forget they are playing a part. They are Tom and Daisy. And, thank Heaven, the play has not been sacrificed to give all to the star. Ann Harding actually has less footage than Myrna Loy - but what she does with it! William Gargan is simply grand as an ex-pug butler. The entire cast is excellent. Don't miss this.*⁶

WHEN LADIES MEET (1933)



Rachel Crothers' *When Ladies Meet* ran for five months on Broadway before spawning this classy screen treatment. As in *The Animal Kingdom*, Harding and Loy (above, centre) head up a very strong cast who conspire to deliver a highly satisfying piece of filmed theatre in which young authoress Loy learns the hard way the difference between the theory and practice of Life. 85 minutes. Fine.

IMDb: Harding's superb performance should have earned an Oscar nomination. Ditto the supporting performance of Alice Brady (above, right) as the flighty society matron

Bridget / A thought provoking and stimulating movie. Ann Harding steals the show / The stars' charisma and tremendously witty dialogue make this one a blast / Why, oh why couldn't those in charge put Myrna Loy's eyebrows where God intended? / Some very tart lines and smart performances by Harding, Loy and Morgan, but the direction (reportedly troubled) is sluggish - takes 45 minutes to warm up / A great example of the type of sophisticated comedy that's just not being done any more / An interesting story, well developed and acted, but with almost no surprises - and definitely *not* a comedy, meaning "something that will make you laugh" / There's something about Ann Harding that you can't help but like. Whether it's her unusual beauty, her sensuous speaking voice, her obvious intelligence - all together she has enormous appeal. She was extremely popular in the early thirties before fans tired of her "stiff upper lip" portrayals and found favourites elsewhere. Her best known film is probably *The Animal Kingdom* in which she and Loy scored such a hit that they were paired again in this scintillating comedy adapted from Rachel Crothers' play. The conversations the two have *When Ladies Meet* make for essential viewing. Highly Recommended.

It's hard to judge this film after seeing the 1941 remake starring Joan Crawford, Greer Garson and Robert Taylor. While both share the same flaws in story and execution, the later version's star power makes the situation more compelling and interesting. Montgomery and Loy are more than watchable and have great spark, but it's the casting of Frank Morgan and Ann Harding that leaves the film a bit flat. While there's nothing particularly wrong with Harding's performance she's just not vibrant enough to make Morgan's leaving her for Loy much of surprise. However, it's inconceivable that a woman as smart and lovely as Loy would want to be with a stodgy, unattractive old man like Morgan over the handsome, fun and charming Montgomery. I don't care how much money or power was involved. Never going to happen. In fact, Morgan is so much older than Loy and Harding that their relationships are a bit creepy. One can hardly blame his character for wanting to be with Loy, it's just that, unlike Herbert Marshall, the role of a roving charmer is not something he's capable of pulling off. While the film features Jimmy's attempts to win Mary away from her aged suitor, it's clever and fun. He even brightens up Harding. Why he wasn't a bigger star is a mystery to me. The scene where the ladies meet is played with intelligence and poignancy and almost makes plodding through the machinations to get there worthwhile ...

The mistress must shoulder some of the blame, considering she did know her lover was married, even though he claimed he wasn't happy. If that was really the case, man up and divorce your wife. In this instance, he wanted both the excitement and the stability. Loy's innate class and intelligence helps you to like her character despite her actions. Her horror at her behaviour, once she realises who she's

talking to, is honest and heartfelt. Her grand idea becomes much harder to bear when faced in reality with the person whose life she's destroying. I don't think I'd thank her for her honesty. Harding plays these final scenes with more dignity than I could muster under the same circumstances. The other performance I have to mention is of Alice Brady She plays Mary's flighty friend untroubled by conventional morality, adding much needed humour and wit to the proceedings. Her ideas about love are absolutely spot on and guaranteed to make you chuckle. This film isn't a total loss as it explores a very interesting topic - whether one should stay in a dead relationship - without the usual moral preachiness. However, it doesn't manage to be very convincing about it either. Perhaps if I wasn't already familiar with the plot and ideas it would have captured my attention more.⁷

[DOUBLE HARNESS \(1933\)](#)



Double Harness, Harding's third consecutive film to be adapted for the screen from the stage, deals with adult material in a mature and insightful way: beneath a superficial amiability, a footloose playboy and pragmatic spinster view the business of marriage with detached, coolly calculated self-interest - until love teaches them the error of their ways. William Powell (above) is on typically peerless form. 69 minutes. Not to be missed.

IMDb: Charming, witty and rather risqué for its day / Ann Harding and William Powell are terrific in this strange little gem that runs the gamut from pre-Code drama to screwball comedy. John Cromwell directs with a sure hand. It's incredible how modern films seem to lack any sense of sophistication and style in comparison with even lesser known films from the '30s like this one. Pure joy / A wonderful but obscure little RKO treasure, gabby, intelligent, rapturous. Harding is radiant and Powell - restrained, suave and charismatic - wonderful as her romantic interest / With clever dialogue, fetching lead actors and delicious directing, I was hooked from the outset. A delight / A dull and talky romance about a woman who has all the wifely virtues vs. a man who is not really the marrying kind / Powell is his usual charming self, but next to Harding he comes off as a typical Hollywood performer - and talk about sophistication! Harding has to be the ultimate in "cool". I can only guess the reason she didn't become as big as Hepburn or Davis is that she didn't fight for better films / Powell seems to play his character with an almost sublime restraint and a barely concealed exuberance, as if he knew this was an Ann Harding picture and it was his duty to bolster her performance and her presence. He does so in the most magnificent fashion. The only thing this film lacked was more - more of the luminous Harding and more of how Powell brought his character into reality despite a stiff and rather formal screenplay.

Double Harness is an interesting film in several respects. Though once a big star at RKO, the Oscar-nominated Ann Harding is almost totally forgotten today, and that's a shame. In this she's positively captivating, delivering a nuanced performance that's relaxed, confident, and in sharp contrast with more theatrical, stylised contemporaries like Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Katharine Hepburn. More along the lines of an Ann Dvorak or (early-talkies) Mary Astor, it's emotionally real without ever going over the top and the character is emotionally very strong and intelligent in an appealingly understated way.

She's a marvellous match with William Powell, on loan from Warner Bros., who's more or less playing his established screen persona, a persona that's charming in the weakest of films. Like his co-star, Powell is exceedingly good at underplaying emotion, often brushing aside conflict with his innate sophistication and breezy manner. The script by Jane Murn (Alice Adams, The Women), adapted from a play by Edward P. Morgan, is adult, realistic and modern, though salacious stuff in 1933. Joan and John have premarital sex, there's much talk about extramarital affairs, Joan's married sister toys with sleeping with another man solely to get money to buy expensive clothes, etc.

Ultimately though, this is a richly romantic film because in part it's so realistic (aside from all the fancy living) and because the performances sell the material so well, resulting in a highly rewarding payoff in the closing reel.⁸

GALLANT LADY (1933)



Gallant Lady tells the story of an unwed mother's slow and largely unplanned but ultimately successful journey back into the life of her son after giving him up for adoption at birth. Co-starring Clive Brook (see also *Interference*) and Otto Kruger (*Ever In My Heart*, *Men In White*, *Another Thin Man*), the film is sentimental but sound, with Harding giving a controlled, earnest, touching performance. *Always Goodbye*, the 1938 remake with Barbara Stanwyck and Herbert Marshall, tweaks the story to make the revelation of Cynthia's gold-digging insincerity more dramatically interesting and is probably the pick of the two versions - though *Gallant Lady* is okay too. 82 minutes.

IMDb: A familiar plot device is here given solid adult treatment. The script is quite well written, raising the characters and situation above a creaky narrative skeleton. Harding is radiant and brilliant - this is one of her finest performances, totally natural, full of pathos and humour. What a fine actress she was! Otto Kruger does a good job as the adoptive father and Dickie Moore is perfect as Deedy, the son. *Gallant Lady* is a rarity well worth seeing / A long and winding trail of unrequited love runs through this story in which all the actors are splendid. Harding is terrific and simply gorgeous. A major star of her day, she deserves to be better remembered / Ann Harding was a true aristocrat of the screen with her silvery blonde hair, beautiful eyes and bewitchingly husky voice. She never played anything but Ladies with a capital L!! *Gallant Lady* (the title suits Ann to a tee!) is a soapy and very melodramatic affair with too many characters. The film would have been tighter without Count Carniri. Apart from the two Italian arias he sang, what was he in the movie for?

THE LIFE OF VERGIE WINTERS (1934)



For the second film running, Harding plays an unmarried mother who surrenders her child for adoption, this time to its father (John Boles, above) and his wife. Once more - though in circumstances quite unlike *Gallant Lady's* - fate will reunite them. Boles, who projects a callow, characterless persona (both here and in *A Message To Garcia*, at least), is miscast as a nationally successful politician, but Harding is wonderful. Not only does the camera love her, but intelligence shines from her eyes, fit to beguile audiences then, now and for as long as films like this continue to be watched. The 82 minute tale is predictably maudlin but Ann's turn renders it time well spent. Walter Brennan makes an uncredited appearance as snooping scandalmonger Roscoe. And finally, should not the diminutive of Virginia be *Virgie*?

IMDb: Movie-making by numbers. If you have seen other sob sister films you will know a reel ahead of time what's going to happen / *The Life Of Vergie Winters* was an RKO vehicle for fading early talkie star Ann Harding, well cast as an unselfish woman foolishly cast aside by her former lover. Everything that female moviegoers would expect from such a story is present, right down to the expectedly downbeat finale, so it's up to the cast to offer their own interpretations to carry off various subplots. Harding's performance is certainly acceptable, but the film, released just before full implementation of the Hays Code, did not do good box office / A dated, old fashioned film made transcendent by the always radiant Harding. Its idealisation of her sacrifice really touched me / Brings together every essential ingredient required for a superior tear jerker. Harding makes her character really believable and Boles seems more human than his usual stuffy self / Bless you TCM ... and Ann Harding, wherever you are.

A contemporary review:

The introductory scenes of The Life Of Vergie Winters recall the "narratage" treatment of The Power And The Glory, but immediately afterward it reverts to the type of that highly popular but scarcely imaginative melodrama Back Street. It is an ingenuous, sentimental affair, with competent acting for the most part and indifferent dialogue.

In this tearful stream of events, Ann Harding plays the role of one of those unfortunate unwed mothers. As this charming actress has a voice in the selection of her stories, it is to be assumed that she decided on this particular one because it bore the earmarks of a box-office winner. Whether it means anything to those who may enjoy this picture or not, it has the distinction of having been adapted from a short story written by Louis Bromfield.

Vergie Winters suffers bravely for her love for John Shadwell, who, as the hands of time turn and the clock towers chime in this film, ascends the ladder of success, becoming a Congressman and then a United States Senator. As he is so clever, he might have avoided all the woe in this chronicle by merely asking Vergie whether the report that she was going to marry another man was true. Jim Winters, Vergie's mercenary father, appears to have had an easy task in pulling the wool over his daughter's eyes, and his success netted him \$10,000, which Laura's father gave him to tell a lie. This old rascal expected that his daughter would become the wife of a humble young man.

At what is considered a propitious time, Vergie becomes the mother of a child and it is not surprising that handsome John Shadwell is the father. With Vergie's full consent, John adopts the infant and the real mother soon goes back to her millinery store in Parkville. Vergie is a stout-hearted lass and when the scarlet women of her town alone patronise her shop she does not weep.

First she seeks to protect John against himself, by refusing to see him for several months. Then comes one tragedy, concerning which it is not necessary to go into detail, and another which gives the sacrificial Vergie a further opportunity to reveal to what lengths she will go in order to protect her daughter.

The narrative covers something like twenty years. John Boles, the leading man of Back Street, gives very much the same sort of portrayal here as he did in the old production. He is beheld on various occasions taking his ease in Vergie's apartment, on one occasion mending her radio so that she will be able to listen to a special symphony. Helen Vinson is sufficiently unsympathetic as Laura. Miss Harding gives a clever performance, but her good work is wasted on such a trivial narrative.⁹

THE FOUNTAIN (1934)



Oh dear. Metaphysical maundering with sentimental interludes, dramatically moribund and deadly dull. Harding is her usual lovely self and Brian Aherne (above) as Lewis is not bad, but ultimately the hopelessly leaden material defeats everyone. Rupert's uncanny ability to die at will may draw a smile, but don't expect much else to. 80 minutes best spent doing something else.

IMDb: Harding spent her stellar career being lady-like in these super tedious, studio bound vehicles. This one comes complete with Hollywood privileged class clichés of lawn dialogues and leaded window sitting rooms. With a couple of striking tracking shots - Harding's arrival, Lukas on the stairs - everyone tries really hard to show for it but no one seems to realise that their notion of classy entertainment is ridiculous, particularly when compared with the vigour of the Cagney and Robinson movies contemporary with it / Harding is radiant and lovingly photographed. She gives a sad and touching performance here. The story is touching, the film sombre / A dreary, depressing movie on a dreary subject (she's married to one, loves a different one, so they all talk, talk, talk...). The mood is sombre and dreary. The talk-talk-talk is dreary. The music is absolutely funereal. One of the main characters was severely wounded in the war (I might say, drearily wounded in the war). His problem is, he has no further will to live. Neither will you once you watch this dirge / Ann Harding in one of her many best performances, in a matinee movie with unusually literate dialogue and a stunning score by Max Steiner, showing he could really compose when free of Selznick memos and the requirement to make Bette Davis seem romantic. If you want Mae Clarke being squished in the face with a grapefruit, this is not the place to look, but criticising a movie for not being like another movie is an elementary critical fallacy. *The Fountain* is a lovely film.

BIOGRAPHY OF A BACHELOR GIRL (1935)



That this film was another adapted from a stage play is not hard to fathom, since traces of the theatrical template remain. But it is none the worse for that, and a strong cast including Robert Montgomery (*When Ladies Meet*), Una Merkel (*Evelyn Prentice*), Edward Everett Horton (*Holiday*) and Edward Arnold (*Eyes In The Night*, *Janie* etc, above) deliver a solid ensemble performance that makes of a somewhat thin story a modestly pleasing success. 82 minutes.

IMDb: She's nearly forgotten today, but Ann Harding was a true cinema aristocrat in the '30s, a movie star who didn't look like one (she wore practically no makeup) but was lovely all the same. She didn't act like one, either. Here, she's a free-thinking artist whose projected tell-all autobiography is going to put an old flame's political career in jeopardy, and she's so obviously more intelligent than any of her co-players that you can't take your eyes off her. Calm, ladylike and vaguely amused by her surroundings, she's a lot like her contemporary Irene Dunne, but less forced. The movie, from a smart S. N. Behrman stage comedy, is a civilised affair where characters bat around words like "propinquity" without flinching and the slowish pacing feels right. Perfect it's not, particularly in the male casting: Robert Montgomery, as her perpetually dissatisfied editor, doesn't stint on the character's unlikability, which leaves one rooting only half-heartedly for their romance to alight. And Edward Everett Horton, as her compromised ex-beau, isn't believable for a moment, being so obviously ... Edward Everett Horton. On the other hand, Edward Arnold, the screen's best Evil Plutocrat of the '30s, is here a quiet, sympathetic spurned beau, and completely charming. It's a pleasant journey back to a time where the general public was more sophisticated, though without Ms. Harding's presence, it wouldn't add up to nearly as much.

ENCHANTED APRIL (1935)



According to a *Radio Times* review, this *amusing insight into Hollywood's view of polite Hampstead society owes more to the 1925 Kane Campbell stage adaptation than the original Elizabeth von Arnim novel that inspired the Oscar-nominated 1991 remake. Rather too brief [at just 63 minutes] to allow the story to weave its magic, it's still an entertaining saga that sees neglected housewives Ann Harding and Katherine Alexander [above, left] rekindle the romance in their respective marriages to budding novelist Frank Morgan and pompous lawyer Reginald Owen, while holidaying in a castle in Italy ... Harding is miscast as the scatty heroine, while a subplot involving artist / landlord Ralph Forbes never quite catches light.* Indeed, compared to the splendid 1991 film, this seems perfunctory and no more than half-realised. It's also very hard to bear Owen's braying ass turn as Henry Arbuthnot, whether "pompous" or not. The best cast is only as strong as its weakest member and he just about sinks this already labouring production single-handedly. Frank Morgan (see also *When Ladies Meet*) Baxter, Alexander and Harding all do their best with thin material, but the overall result is a disappointing misfire.

IMDb: A tremendously disappointing version of a charming story. Though Owen did chew the scenery, I found him moderately amusing in his brief scenes. But the movie was just too darned short to convey the story properly! / This film has a luminous Ann Harding and a wonderful Frank Morgan, but the acting of others renders it more of a farce than the wonderful unfolding of the 1991 version. Reginald Owen's Arbuthnot is painful to watch. A let-down / Harding plays the most important role in the film in a manner that makes her seem ridiculous. Her "doe-eyed" expression and vacant stares really make you wonder if this isn't a zombie movie or she's just meant to be an idiot! And to make it worse, Reginald Owen plays a character so obnoxious and bombastic that I was very close to turning off the film - he was that awful and unbelievable.

THE FLAME WITHIN (1935)



Harding plays a psychiatrist so inept that she counsels an alcoholic with a large decanter of whisky on her desk and, when he develops a passion for her, tells him she loves him too but they must suppress their feelings for the greater good! Her bloodless intellectual persona is ill-suited to a part in which she is supposedly in love with two men. Unidexter Herbert Marshall (above) hides his limp valiantly, which is more than can be said of this nonsensical, hopelessly ill-conceived dog. Better than *The wretched Fountain* - just! 72 minutes.

IMDb: A dated, muddled and almost laughable drama about the psychology of love and its responsibilities / Passé 1930's culture and women's issues should not blur the impact and powerful relevance of the theme of eschewing self interest to find fulfilment on a higher level / Interesting though inchoate / Harding had a blonde, patrician beauty that is lovely and her acting could be subtle, thoughtful and surprisingly modern. However, the one thing I have not seen her capable of is physical passion. She and Marshall strike no sparks and seem to have no more than a companionable friendship but neither does she give any indication that she burns with passion for Hayward, so the viewer is left with no investment in either relationship. O'Sullivan has a good scene or two, but her character is awfully inconsistent, swinging from noble to nutty, without enough exploration by director Goulding of what, other than neediness, could account for her feelings. The now jaw-dropping sexism of some of the attitudes expressed, as well as the simplistic look at the mechanics of psychiatry also work against the drama and make it quite dated / Harding barely gets through this story, with her elbow often protruded and some emoting close-ups. Marshall tries to maintain dignity, against all odds. O'Sullivan is pretty. While lower-billed, Hayward unexpectedly becomes the focus. A-list director Edmund Goulding was successful enough to write, produce and direct *The Flame Within* at MGM, but psychiatry based on seeing a patient's alcoholic boyfriend seems unprofessional. Some of it is unintentionally funny / Unconvincing.

PETER IBBETSON (1935)



"The strangest things are true and the truest things are strange." Harding and Gary Cooper (above) star in this luminous, poetic reverie about the unconquerable strength of the human spirit. Ida Lupino contributes a lovely early cameo. Ann first appears in the 32nd minute, but dominates proceedings thereafter with elegant poise, grace and beauty. 85 magical minutes.

IMDb: Initially bland, due in part to Harding, who is blonde but visually monochromatic, with minimal eyebrows and make-up, which makes her seem very plain, even though she is pretty. This was the "taste of the times" for a serious "good" woman. *Peter Ibbetson* is dated and will be much too slow for many viewers. Its best part is the last third, when suddenly we are in an expressive fantasy, completely grounded in the earlier part, but also completely different. The effects here are not only still magical, reminiscent of Durer etchings, but also overwhelming when you think of how difficult it was to achieve them in 1935. The film's theme is clearly coloured by the "astral body" theories of the Eastern religions that were popular in Hollywood then, having a strong influence on art, architecture and design during this period. A quiet but powerful film (*quiet* and *powerful* became Cooper's screen hallmarks), the strength of *Peter Ibbetson* is its simplicity of message / Although he appears only briefly, Slade, who is blind but can see, is a key character. His words are similar to those of Saint Exupery in *Le Petit Prince*, published in 1943: *It is only with the heart that one can rightly see; what is essential is invisible to the eyes.* If the heart can give sight to the blind, then what can true love do? / Seek out *Peter Ibbetson*. You will be transported to a world that no longer exists, and into a story that requires the viewer to be a real romantic with great imagination. It will reward you with a deeply touching tale where true love finally wins out under the most extraordinary of circumstances. What more need be said?

A contemporary review:

The striking thing about the new screen version of Peter Ibbetson lies in the identity of its director, Henry Hathaway. Known almost exclusively for his Lives Of A Bengal Lancer, Mr. Hathaway bridges the spiritual gulfs between that rousing super-Western and the fragile dream world of du Maurier's sentimental classic with astonishing success. With his directness and his hearty masculine qualities, he skilfully escapes all the lush pitfalls of the plot and gives it a tenderness that is always gallant instead of merely soft. The photoplay, though scarcely a dramatic thunderbolt, possesses a luminous beauty and a sensitive charm that make it attractive and moving. Under Mr. Hathaway's management Miss Ann Harding, who has been losing prestige lately, gives her finest performance, while Gary Cooper fits into the picture with unexpected success. Hathaway's special triumph is in the dream sequences, which could have degenerated so easily into the double-exposure ghostliness of the recent Return Of Peter Grimm. Carefully avoiding the temptation to bathe the screen in misty photography and heavily remind his audiences that this is a spirit world, he abandons conventional screen devices and boldly insists on the reality of the dreams. This is a shrewd modern touch that goes far to make du Maurier's celebrated love story dramatically effective. The astral sphere on which the lovers moved through a lifetime of happiness, while their bodies remained shackled to the earth, thus becomes to us what it was to them, more vividly actual than the daytime world that kept them apart. In arranging this new adaptation of Peter Ibbetson, Constance Collier has made a number of minor alterations without disturbing the central theme. You doubtless recall that Peter and Mary were childhood sweethearts in Paris, but were separated when the boy's uncle took him away to England. They meet again after they have grown up and, because of the strange bond that is between them, know each other almost at once. In this new version it is Mary's husband, the Duke of Towers, whom Peter accidentally kills. When he is sentenced to life imprisonment he loses the will to live. But under Mary's guidance he comes to share her belief in the power of dreams. Although their life together is at first marred by Peter's lack of complete faith, their dream world becomes a paradise that lasts them all their life. The photoplay suffers from a languid beginning which devotes too much time to the childhood preliminaries. It is difficult to believe in the extraordinary bond between the boy and the girl, and Mr. Hathaway is unable to manipulate Dickie Moore and Virginia Weidler so as to make them seem more than merely clever stage children. But he is on sure ground after the lovers grow up. Miss Harding, in giving a strikingly sensitive performance, abandons many of the personal mannerisms that have hurt her screen work in the past. There are especially effective performances by Christian Rub as the garrulous veteran of the Napoleonic wars, by John Halliday as the rigid Duke of Towers and by Donald Meek as Peter's blind employer. Ida Lupino is excellent in a brief part.¹⁰

LOVE FROM A STRANGER (aka *A Night Of Terror*) (1937)



Adapted from a Frank Vosper stage play based on Agatha Christie short story *Philomel Cottage*, *Love From A Stranger* wears its hackneyed murder mystery credentials on its sleeve. Rathbone's loopy serial killer Lovell (above) is a typically Christiesque cardboard caricature and it's possible to foresee from about twenty minutes in exactly where all this will go. Though the two leads commit to their parts with spirit enough to hold viewers' interest through 87 mildly entertaining minutes, the film ends anticlimactically with the means of Carol's final deliverance too pat and contrived. After completing *Love From A Stranger*, the newly married Harding took a five year career break. Perhaps she considered work of this standard not worth her time. Perhaps she was right.

IMDb: Typical Christie / All right, it's a bit creaky and stagy, but the Christie plot (with a strong family resemblance to *Gaslight*) is gripping and the necessary claustrophobic atmosphere is established and maintained thanks in part to the excellent score from a youthful Benjamin Britten. But the best reason to see the film is the terrifying performance of Basil Rathbone, who reminds us again what an accomplished and versatile actor he was well before *Sherlock Holmes*. No goalie-mask, no retractable steel claws, no camera tricks, he scares the pants off you using only an actor's equipment. His portrayal of a psychotic, obsessive Bluebeard is unforgettable / A good thriller with an interesting story / A night of ham / Not really "good" but pretty interesting, with a delicious climax if you can wait it out / Contains some of the most histrionic acting I've ever witnessed. I never knew that anyone could go so far over the top and not shoot out of the frame into space / The best of the early Christie films / Underrated / Harding is delicious.

EYES IN THE NIGHT (1942)



After a five year sabbatical, Harding returns to the screen with another murder mystery that, while no epic, surpasses the cheesy *Love From A Stranger*, thanks to a more current and elaborate plot and a more eclectic set of characters, including a blind gumshoe (Edward Arnold, second right above) and Friday, his resourceful German Shepherd guide dog. The abrupt last-scene transformation of Donna Reed's character from scheming minx to loving step-daughter sticks in the throat. Nonetheless, though dated, at just 80 minutes, worth a go.

IMDb: Not Hitchcock but nicely done / Pat and simplistic in places with a slightly daffy plot, but the film has three things going for it: the amazing Friday, delightful Edward Arnold and Zinnemann's fine direction / A few contrived bits and the end is rushed, but still 80 minutes well spent / A minor B melodrama, brisk and no-nonsense / A near-classic film hobbled by a rushed and unfocused second act and a final wrap-up that comes across as slightly unsatisfying / Adapted from a decent detective novel, the Nazi spy element was amped up to cash in on home front paranoia. Along with the better detective elements went most of the logic, suspense and character motivation of the original story. In its place is a confused mess that even director Fred Zinnemann (later to do *High Noon* and *From Here To Eternity*) could not salvage / Donna Reed [second left above] needed her face slapped / Harding (as always) is quite good and Reed (as always) is quite bad. The talent disparity gives their scenes together a farcical quality that invests the film with a certain camp appeal. Reed might be the only aspiring movie actress challenged by the role of an aspiring movie actress / The dog steals the show / A really neat mix of intrigue, mystery and humour to boot. Wicked fun / An amateurish screenplay, cartoon villains and preposterous story make this a ridiculous thriller.

THE NORTH STAR (1943)



Blatant anti-Nazi propaganda vehicle *The North Star* opens in the summer of 1941 just before the German invasion of the Ukraine. The first forty minute act paints a bucolic image of peasants about their simple, virtuous lives, with its five musical interludes redolent of Rodgers and Hammerstein at their most folksy. But then the mood darkens as war brings not just occupation and death but unspeakable wickedness. These Nazis break a woman's limbs for not telling what she does not know. Worse, they bleed children to death to provide blood for their wounded soldiers. Needless to say, with stirring deeds and patriotic speeches, the enemy is overthrown. Harding's part is small but important. Two Walters, Huston and Brennan, also figure. Needs to be seen. 106 minutes.

IMDb: One of the worst propaganda stunts I've seen. I hope nobody takes this movie seriously / Uplifting / Don't miss this one-of-a-kind story. You may never see a film like it anywhere else / Viewed in the age of *Saving Private Ryan* and *Platoon*, this is an artificially tame war film But as a history lesson it well rewards time spent viewing this page from a perilous time / If you can stand the first half, the second is worth a watch / All film must be placed in the context of the day it was made and that is definitely the case with this rather surreal gem ... Compare Dana Andrews' very bad monologue as he flies to his death to his stunning performance but two years later in *The Best Years Of Our Lives* when, without saying a word, just sitting in a bomber with that "thousand yard stare" we far better grasp the horror of war / A powerful film not about bashing Stalin or the Germans but rather about people forced to deal with life and death situations. In this regard, it is brilliant / Lying, bigoted propaganda. Watching it I realised what Mary McCarthy meant when she said of scriptwriter Hellmann that "Every word she writes is a lie, including *and* and *the*." / "Propaganda" or "Art"? You decide.

JANIE (1944)



This tiresome film about precocious children (and Janie, played by Joyce Reynolds - second right above - in particular) livens up in the last fifteen minutes, but there's far too little substance to make the whole worthwhile. Edward Arnold (second left above) as Janie's father and, surprisingly, nine year old Clare Foley as her younger sister both perform ably. Mother Harding, a cipher, incidental to the plot (such as it is) and minimally present, is given nothing to work with - though she thought well enough of the experience to reprise her role in 1946 sequel *Janie Gets Married*. 102 minutes of dreary wartime banality - though some apparently like it very much:

IMDb: This sparkling, almost forgotten comic gem is an idealised slice of teenage life from during the war when impressionable young girls had to contend with not only their high school boyfriends, but troop trains stopping off on their way to boot camp. Adapted from a hit Broadway comedy, *Janie* is a non-stop delight as vivacious sixteen year old Janie (Joyce Reynolds) falls in and out of love amidst all the send-ups of classic screwball farce. A wonderful group of character actors (Edward Arnold, Ann Harding, Robert Benchley, Hattie McDaniel, Barbara Brown) support the carryings on. The fast-paced editing earned a deserved Oscar nom. The clever and inventive screenplay and Michael Curtiz's marvellous comedic direction are worthy of praise. Watch for a totally unbilled Andy Williams in the brief Army quartet scene. Yes, *Janie* is naive but lots of fun / Hard to believe that boys like these were dying by the thousands on the beachheads of Normandy and Saipan. None of that here. After all, it's the Janies of the world, safe and shielded, they were fighting for. Even if just two hours, what a great escape from all those other horrors. This is small town America, about to undergo a sea change. You can hear the waves lapping. Really it's not just the army that's come

to Hortonville; it's the outside world and, once the war ends, all the malt shops, "smooching" parties and small town innocence will never be the same. This is not only a darn good little comedy but also a darn good little time capsule worth preserving.

A contemporary review:

The popular theatrical premise that American family life is almost completely dominated by brash and precocious youths is the point of departure for considerable juvenile rumpus and uproar in the Warner production of Janie. In the most generous manner imaginable (outside a Hardy Family film) the writers of this childish frolic, based on a previous Broadway play, have turned the home over to the youngsters and let them have their reckless way. As a consequence we see here a picture in which the comedy is wholly derived from the spectacle of children tearing a house up, to their parents' frozen dismay. Certain writers have handled juvenile characters in a wistful and penetrating style. But the authors of Janie, play and picture, have simply cut a theatrical farce with some kids. And the bluntness with which they have done so provides very little warm appeal. There may be some humour in the aspects of a schoolgirl pre-empting the family phone while her father fumes and sputters or filling the house with soldier friends who treat it precisely as a cyclone while the young lady meekly assists. But there certainly isn't any insight in it, nor any sound appreciation of youth. For this reason, probably, the performance of Joyce Reynolds in the title role is completely surface and pretentious; she had nothing with which to work, and so she makes of Janie just a sweet and pampered girl. Clare Foley, as her seven-year-old sister, who gets off such unnatural lines as "I have no friends; I'm anti-social," is likewise a creature from a script - a deliberately contrived little baggage, loaded for farcical laughs. Edward Arnold, Robert Benchley, Ann Harding and Barbara Brown play fatuous adults and a whole pack of other youngsters behave like kids instructed just to act hey-hey.¹¹



IT HAPPENED ON FIFTH AVENUE (1947)



A pleasant, anodyne though ultimately heart-warming film about homeless folk squatting in a plutocrat's Fifth Avenue mansion, left empty each winter. When his daughter runs away from finishing school, she decides to live there and becomes, *in cognito*, one of the community. Soon Moneybags (Charles Ruggles, above) and his ex-wife have done the same. Just over halfway through a sixty year acting career, Ruggles as the millionaire property developer does well, as does Victor Moore as the vagrant. Harding, whose first entrance (in a silly hat) comes just on the hour mark, is her usual sure-footed self. Best Story Oscar nominated (losing out to *The Big Heart*). 115 minutes.

IMDb: A Christmas classic / Victor Moore is fantastic as a homeless man who travels between a wealthy man's winter and summer homes when the man is at his other home. Ruggles' last words will make you cry: "Remind me to board up that fence. Next year he's coming in the front door." A wonderful and unique story / This movie will leave a lump in your chest and a tear or two on your cheek / Cute acting with humorous moments and I enjoyed seeing the B actors - but this film is Communist propaganda disguised as fluff, actually worth watching in order to see how blatant it is. If you like it, you will also like *The Grapes Of Wrath*, *Lost Horizon* and other similar political-fluffy films / If you think too much, the movie is really quite silly and hard to believe. However, it works very well, mostly because of the marvellous direction. While it could have been played for wacky laughs (and there are many opportunities for this), the director chose instead to emphasise the characters' humanity and fundamental sweetness. In many cases, the laughs take a back seat to letting this goodness to come slowly out through the course of this sentimental and nice but never cloying film.

THE MAGNIFICENT YANKEE (aka *The Man With Thirty Sons*) (1950)



First a book (*Mr Justice Holmes*), then a play (*The Magnificent Yankee*), then a screenplay (*The Man With Thirty Sons*), this somewhat superficial but always watchable biopic covers Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior's life from the time of his appointment to the US Supreme Court in 1902 to shortly after his retirement, aged 90, in 1932. (He died in 1935.) Through each of his thirty years as a Justice, Holmes, who had no children, took as his secretary Harvard's top law student. By the time he retired, there had been thirty such post-holders, which is where the "thirty sons" comes from. Louis Calhern (above) played the part of Holmes on stage and reprised it on screen in an Oscar nominated performance. Harding, aging convincingly (see below) from 62 to 89 matches him all the way. 89 minutes. Good.

IMDb: Well acted, literate, gracious and rich in human interest. A fine film / A sweet, low-key, moving character portrait, not "opened up" much from the stage and reeking of mid-century theatrical conventions - you can tell which lines were the scene-enders. The themes are Holmes's unfulfilled desire for sons, his abiding love for his wife and his thoughtfulness and moral decency as a Supreme Court justice. Episodic and on the slow side, it has a civics lesson mustiness and yet is satisfyingly sincere. The earnestness that MGM so often lent to its Americana works in its favour for a change. Calhern's performance is a model for aspiring actors. Harding strikes unusual notes of fire and resolve in the standard behind-every-man-a-loving-spouse part. Not a showy or brilliant film but a thoroughly satisfying one / It's sad that while Calhern was Oscar nominated Harding was not. The two roles are so entwined that I don't think one should have been honoured without the other. The same thing happened when William Powell was nominated for *The Thin Man* while Myrna Loy, equally fine, was snubbed.

Tall, debonair Louis Calhern earned his sole Oscar nomination in 1950 for portraying Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in one of the corniest biopics ever, The Magnificent Yankee. Not that Calhern isn't good (as is Ann Harding as his wife), but I can't help but feel this nomination was to make up for the one he didn't get the same year for a much more deserving role as a lawyer, the shady Lon Emmerich in John Huston's great film The Asphalt Jungle. Lon, down on his luck and his cash, hopes to fleece the thieves after their heist so he can vanish far away with his mistress (an early role for Marilyn Monroe). Despite his unscrupulous designs, Lon managed, thanks to Calhern, to garner some of the audience's sympathy anyway.

In The Magnificent Yankee, Calhern's Holmes almost becomes a comic figure as it speeds through his 30 years on the Supreme Court, with very little focus on the cases themselves. You just wait for him to mention yelling fire in a crowded movie theatre (though it's an opera house in the movie) but you get little more insight into his judicial thoughts as the movie focuses on how he and his wife use the revolving door of clerks to substitute for their lack of children of their own. Perhaps the most surprising thing about The Magnificent Yankee is that it was directed by John Sturges, the man who would go on to make Bad Day At Black Rock, The Magnificent Seven and The Great Escape. This film definitely feels at odds with what Sturges accomplished on those films.

Calhern did have an impressive career, appearing in many notable films such as the ambassador of Sylvania in the Marx Brothers' classic Duck Soup as well as roles in The Gorgeous Hussy, The Life Of Emile Zola, Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet, 1943's Heaven Can Wait, Hitchcock's Notorious, the title role in 1953's Julius Caesar and his final role as Uncle Willy in High Society, the musicalisation of The Philadelphia Story. For me though, The Asphalt Jungle stands as his crowning achievement. It's not that The Magnificent Yankee is bad, it's just corny as hell and seems like it's providing the bare bones of a life that I for one would have welcomed learning more about.¹²



[Ann Harding as Fanny Bowditch Holmes aged 62 and 89](#)

THE UNKNOWN MAN (1951)



This tricky, thought-provoking film would have us believe that a top lawyer (even though not a criminal lawyer) might plausibly be unaware of organised crime, protection rackets etc. Walter Pidgeon (above, right) is the allegedly crack legal eagle who's actually a naive, morally hidebound mutt. Harding, his wife, takes yet another colourless loyal spouse role that doesn't challenge or extend her one bit. 86 minutes. Different enough to be worth a go.

IMDb: Excellent on all counts, especially the script, which keeps you on tenterhooks right to the end. Walter Pidgeon must have been, in his time, a great and imposing actor. His magnificent, deep voice is the kind you don't hear any more now / Short on urban grit and long on rhetoric, *The Unknown Man* belongs to the noir cycle less by style or structure than by its acknowledgement of the pervasive corruption of American municipal politics / Hopelessly hamstrung by the requirements of the Production Code, *The Unknown Man* is a rather nasty piece of filmmaking, with machinations that are hopelessly unrealistic / MGM made some excellent film noir. Unfortunately, this is not one of them / What starts out as a very real legal dilemma - exonerating a guilty man and what to do about it - evolves into a contrived storyline, not helped by a highly contrived climax in the prison cell. The film is too tricky for its own good / Pidgeon is excellent throughout. Ditto Sullivan's first-rate performance. Too bad the rest of the movie doesn't measure up / The violence is never on stage, but just off camera - but the violence is not the point. The point is the protagonist's moral dilemma, which is cleverly, albeit disturbingly, resolved / Nicely cast, nicely done / An absurd plot with some good acting, but not recommended / An interesting time passer that really doesn't make a lot of sense. Too bad / Pigeon plays the part of a truly disgraceful lawyer.

THE MAN IN THE GRAY FLANNEL SUIT (1956)



After launching her screen career in 1929 playing opposite Fredric March in *Paris Bound*, Harding trades lines with him again (above) in this fine, deeply touching film about spiritual integrity and the high price demanded of those who dare to oppose societal pressure to conform. Harding only has two scenes, one of five minutes and the other of one, but does creditably in both. Gregory Peck and Lee J. Cobb also impress, though the biggest revelation is March, whose turn in the pivotal role of PR chief exec and absentee father Hopkins is exemplary. 153 minutes, from a Sloan Wilson novel. Very satisfying.

IMDb: Others have commented that this film is too long and boring and some have noted that the director was an unknown and incapable. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nunnally Johnson has written, directed and produced many significant films, including the Oscar winning *Three Faces Of Eve*. This film's subtle use of colours and light and its development of the characters is so powerful that the film leaves its viewer, even today, with an overwhelming feeling of regret. Regret for wasting life on work, worry and the pursuit of happiness, in lieu of actual happiness. The purpose of a great film is not to entertain but to evoke emotions that live inside us, but are rarely accessed. This film is one of the greats, for its uncanny ability to draw out in a timeless way the futility of modern capitalist life without being obvious or overpowering. You just feel bad, and that's good / I was knocked out by March. His type-A, workaholic executive was touching on many levels. His utter tiredness, alcoholic puffiness and innate sadness was plastered over with a Willy Loman-like veneer of gung-ho, jolly-good-fellow false heartiness. How familiar that character was and is - in real life. His ambition, greed and drive had become a habit, and like any junkie, he was simply unable to quit, despite the human cost. I will never forget the scene in his office when his wife calls him up and he slowly hangs up the phone. A very fine film, with many truths about our national character and obsessions / Hideous with a capital H! / Part awful and part intriguing / A film that reaches far beyond its time. From the troubles to the triumphs of the protagonist to the intensity and sincerity of its ethos, this cinematic work is an underexposed classic. The story clearly exposes the moral and emotional importance of honesty and its consequences. The performances by all are outstanding and will resonate with the viewer dramatically / Better verbally than visually / A gem.

Obituary

ANN HARDING, ACTRESS HAILED FOR ROLES AS ELEGANT WOMEN

By CAROL LAWSON

The New York Times, 4 September 1981

Ann Harding, who was known for her stage and screen portrayals of beautiful, aristocratic women in the 1920s and '30s, died on Tuesday at her home in Sherman Oaks, California, after a long illness. She was 79 years old.

Miss Harding made her Broadway debut in 1921 in "Like a King." In his review in The New York Times, Alexander Woollcott complimented the producer for "selecting the comely and interesting" young actress for the play. Miss Harding's first major success came two years later in the hit show "Tarnish."

A petite woman with a patrician face and long blond hair tied in a bun at the nape of her neck, the actress appeared in ten plays on Broadway during the '20s, including "Thoroughbreds," "Stolen Fruit," "A Woman Disputed" and "The Taming Of The Shrew."

A Hit in 'Mary Dugan'

She had her second big success in 1927 as the title character in "The Trial of Mary Dugan." She played the role 437 times in New York and then toured in it.

In 1929, Miss Harding left New York for Hollywood to embark on a film career. She made "about 40" pictures, by her own count. Because of her stage experience, she was much in demand in the early days of talking pictures when there was a scarcity of beautiful actresses in Hollywood who knew how to deliver a line.

Miss Harding made her film debut in the 1929 picture "Paris Bound." Later that year she starred opposite Ronald Colman in "Condemned." She continued to make one film after another for the next several years, including the first movie version of Philip Barry's "Holiday," in 1930; "The Girl of the Golden West," "East Lynne," "The Animal Kingdom" with Leslie Howard," "When Ladies Meet" with Joan Crawford and Robert Montgomery, "Biography Of A Bachelor Girl," based on S.N. Behrman's play "Biography"; "Peter Ibbetson" with Gary Cooper and "Love From A Stranger."

Left Screen in 1936

In 1936, Miss Harding retired from the screen after a bitter court fight with her former husband, the actor Harry Bannister, over custody of their daughter, Jane, who was born in 1928. She and Mr. Bannister had married in 1926 and divorced in 1932.

Later, Miss Harding, who had been under contract to RKO Pathé Studio, did not speak of Hollywood in flattering terms. "I loathed the stupidity in the handling of the material in Hollywood," she remarked. Nor did she like the studio system. "If you're under contract when you're making pictures you may get the plums, but they own your soul," she said. "If you're not under contract, you have to take your chances."

In 1937, she married Werner Janssen, the symphony conductor. Miss Harding returned to Hollywood in 1943 when Mr. Janssen's work took him there. She made two films that year, "Mission To Moscow" and "The North Star." She and Mr. Janssen were divorced in 1962.

Known for Supporting Roles

Later in her film career, Miss Harding was known for her supporting roles as wives and mothers. In 1951 she appeared as the gracious Mrs. Oliver Wendell Holmes, opposite Louis Calhern, in "The Magnificent Yankee." In 1956, she played Fredric March's wife in "The Man In The Gray Flannel Suit."

Miss Harding returned to Broadway in 1949 to take over the leading role in the comedy hit "Goodbye, My Fancy." In 1962 she appeared in the short-lived "General Seeger" starring George C. Scott and in 1964 she was seen briefly in "Abraham Cochrane."

The daughter of the late General Grant C. Gately, Miss Harding was born Dorothy Gately at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas on 7 August, 1902. She grew up on Army posts around the country and in Havana. "Before I was 13 years old I had attended 13 different schools," the actress once said. She studied drama with Otis Skinner at the Baldwin School in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, where she appeared as Macduff in a production of "Macbeth" that featured Cornelia Otis Skinner as Lady Macbeth.

Was a Script Reader

At first, Miss Harding supported herself as a clerk for an insurance company while moonlighting as a reader for the Famous-Players-Lasky film company. Her first professional appearance was in "Inheritors" with the Provincetown

Players. Besides the stage and screen, Miss Harding also appeared on television. She starred with Dorothy Gish and Beulah Bondi in a 1960 television adaptation of Paul Osborn's play "Morning's at Seven" and was also seen on the "Ben Casey" and "The Defenders" series.

Miss Harding is survived by her daughter, Jane Otto, and four grandchildren.

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[Ann Harding \(1902-1981\)](#)

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