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When Roger Ebert Was a Cub Critic

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr.
April 5, 2013

Reflections on knowing the late film critic in the early days of his career



I first met Roger Ebert late in 1967. We were both young upstarts at *The Chicago Sun-Times*. He was, at 24, the new movie reviewer. I was, at 23, a cub reporter on the City Desk.

In those days, Chicago had four daily newspapers, with fierce competition, still in the style of [The Front Page](#), which drove editors and reporters alike (getting a scoop on the street a few minutes ahead of the other guy was actually a big deal). *The Sun-Times* was the paper of the people; *The Tribune* was the paper of the suburbs. But even then, at the very beginning of his career, Roger was attracting readers from other papers with his trademark reviews: lucidly written with spirit and humor, and making discerning judgments that everyone could understand, even on hard movies. He wrote his reviews as simply, cleanly, and quickly as a veteran reporter would write a police story.

In fact, the reporters then were not Woodstein wannabes (Watergate was five years in the future) but classic, hard-bitten guys (Georgie Anne Geyer was a notable feminist exception), members of the Newspaper Guild, who after work liked nothing better than to lean on their elbows at Ricardo's and over plenty of hard whiskey tell us young 'uns tall tales to see how credulous we were.

Because we were so green, Roger and I became friends. He was especially stout then, but with a mischievous smile and a light in his eyes. He had a very wry take on the Chicago newspaper scene and a very real melancholy about the city, which in 1968 exploded with SDS riots, vicious gang wars, the torching and looting of the city after the death of Martin Luther King, and the police riots and general debacle at the summer's Democratic convention that nominated Hubert Humphrey.

When I had the temerity to write a piece in the community paper serving the University of Chicago neighborhood criticizing Roger's review of *Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey* (too optimistic, said I), Roger good-naturedly responded, dissing me. We argued back and forth for several issues about realism and idealism, and about the significance of humankind's transition from apes fighting with each other at the beginning of the movie to the astronauts fighting with Hal the computer at the end. We both got a thumbs-down (and a big surprise) when Mike Royko, then a columnist at the *Daily News*, wrote a one-line commentary: "Why don't you guys shut up?"

Another time, Pauline Kael, the great *New Yorker* film critic, gave a speech in Chicago and asked Roger to bring some friends and join her for a drink after dinner. He asked me to come. The elite reviewer meets the emerging reviewer of the people. But, in her droll, sarcastic way, Kael clearly saw Roger as a gift to the future. Perhaps like her, he loved movies that were fun and appealed to emotions—and was skeptical of the highbrow. It wasn't quite a passing of the torch from one generation to another—Roger had barely started—but that is eventually what happened.

I left the paper in the fall of 1968 to go to law school. Roger, of course, went on to great success and acclaim both from his peers (he won the first Pulitzer Prize for movie criticism, in 1975) and from the millions who had deep faith in his print reviews and his pioneering TV shows about movies. Over the years, with his syndicated reviews both in print and on TV as well as in his 13 books, he truly became the peoples' reviewer, with his warm spirit that found something to like in most films and was rarely snarky even when it was bombs-away.

Through the last 10 years of his life, he persevered, as the obituaries have noted, against serious, disfiguring, and disabling cancer. But the generous, discerning tone of the reviews never changed. A few months ago, learning of how grave his condition had become, I wrote him an email, recalling the beginning of it all more than 45 years before, when he began his remarkable ascent. He quickly wrote back, ending his note:

"Those were the golden years."

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