



Reviews & Views

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Corman Chronicles

Biographer Beverly Gray is in a unique position to recall some of the marketing techniques employed by the legendary Roger Corman. She used to work for him.

By Richard Horgan

After spending the last few years extricating her May 2000 biography of Roger Corman from a bankrupt publisher and, in the process, taking time out to write a similar book about director Ron Howard, Los Angeles author [Beverly Gray](#) is delighted to be hitting the road once again in support of a newly updated and repackaged version of the tome released this January by Thunder's Mouth Press.

With Corman celebrating his 50th anniversary as a producer and unleashing yet another transmuted horror flick, *Dinocroc*, at this week's American Film Market convention in Santa Monica, the time seems ripe for another look at Gray's wonderfully balanced account of her old boss now titled [Roger Corman: Blood Sucking Vampires, Flesh-Eating Cockroaches, and Driller Killers](#). Although Gray worked for Corman on two separate occasions, first as his general assistant (1973-75) and then as a story editor and development executive (1986-94), he ultimately played no part in the research for the book. But it certainly wasn't for lack of trying.

"When I first got the contract to write the book, I called Roger and he asked me to come in and see him," Gray explains. "I've got to do my Roger Corman imitation here, because everyone including Ron Howard does a Roger Corman imitation. 'Beverly, I would be happy to cooperate with you in any possible way, as long as you can reassure me that this book will be largely favorable.'"

"I tried to be diplomatic, then he came back to me within a month or two and said he had decided that he wanted me and my publisher [Renaissance Books] to sign a legal document saying that he could read the book in manuscript and remove anything he considered derogatory," Gray continues. "So I let a few weeks pass and wrote a letter saying that among the lessons I had learned from him over the years was the importance of artistic independence. And he came back to me once more after that."

Corman's first production, *Monster from the Ocean Floor*, and his latest, *Dinocroc*, about the discovery of a



BeverlyGray.com

Author Beverly Gray

prehistoric crocodile, were both sparked by items he read in the *Los Angeles Times*, a favorite source over the years of potential story ideas. In fact, Corman once arranged for footage to be shot of the San Francisco earthquake and L.A. riots in hopes of making hit disaster movies of those real-life events, but his inability to make and distribute movies as fast as he used to eventually put a halt to the feasibility of those projects.

Another favorite tactic of Corman's has been to ascertain Hollywood's next sure-fire blockbuster and get a low-budget imitator into theaters in advance of that film's release, thereby riding on the marketing and publicity coattails of a studio's moneyed campaign. Gray says she has no doubt that at some point in the last year, a project along the lines of *The Other Passion of the Christ* must have crossed the wily producer's mind.

"That was one of the things Corman did best and one of the things he seemed to enjoy most," suggests Gray. "My classic example is *Carnosaur*. I was working there at the time [1993] and it was really clear that *Jurassic Park* was going to be a huge blockbuster and of course it was also taking its time getting made."



Jeff Vespa/Wireimage.com

Producer Roger Corman

"So in the time that it was being shot, we all jumped in and starting hustling about making a dinosaur movie and getting it into the theaters three or four weeks before *Jurassic Park* opened," she adds. "Everyone knew it wasn't going to be technologically as expensive or challenging, but it was the first." True to form, Corman went on to recycle the dinosaur sets he built for *Carnosaur* on a pair of sequels, a "girls in fur bikinis" movie by Jim Wynorski called *Dinosaur Island* and *Raptor*.

Then there were the tag lines for Corman's films: It's always harder at night for the *Night Call Nurses* or, in a similar vein, Keep Abreast of the Medical World with the *Candy Stripe Nurses*. Although Corman is certainly not the only person in Hollywood to pursue high concept thinking, his movies would sometimes come together around a tag line he knew he wanted on the poster.

As far as film titles are concerned, Corman himself has occasionally trumpeted his attempts to keep up with youth culture by surveying 50 high schools from select demographics and so on, but according to Gray, the truth is far less impressiver. During her early days at New World Pictures, Gray was one of the girls enlisted to hit local high schools with said list

of titles in tow.

"We went up to the various students who were sitting around eating lunch and would ask them whether they rather see a movie called *Tidal Wave* or a movie called *The Submergence of Japan*, or something like that," says Gray. "I think in later years they did that more in shopping malls."

"But there was a lot of debate among people who did this as to whether Roger really didn't know what the results of the poll were going to be, or whether he pretty much knew but was just kind of going through the exercise," adds Gray. "What I love is that early on, people like Joe Dante and Allan Arkush would just decide on what answers Roger wanted and then go out to lunch. They wouldn't bother with it at all."

A common complaint among today's moviegoers is that trailers sometimes excerpt footage that is not included in the actual movie. But leave it to Corman to take that idea far beyond its logical threshold. In 1979, when it became apparent that the subject matter of the movie *Screamers* was leaving people lukewarm, Corman instructed Wynorski to jazz up the trailer.

After an actor was made up to look like his entrails were hanging out of his stomach, footage was shot of him chasing a girl in a bikini down a hallway and added to the trailer, thereby whetting the appetite of

drive-in patrons. However, after paying customers in Atlanta quasi-rioted when the film showed up sans entrails, Corman quickly had that trailer footage spliced into the movie itself.

“Of course, the classic story is that Roger told Martin Scorsese he would finance *Mean Streets* if he would make all the characters black,” says Gray with a laugh. “But the one that really interests me is Quentin Tarantino, because Tarantino co-dedicated *Reservoir Dogs* to Roger, but he didn’t come to Roger for the money.”

“I had a talk about that with Monte Hellman, who goes way back with Roger. Monte did help Tarantino get the money but kind of told him to stay away from Roger, that he wouldn’t be able to make the movie he wanted as he wanted to make it, that there were other ways to have more of the kind of freedom that he wanted.” When presented later by a reporter with the hypothetical question of what he would do if Tarantino came to him asking for a million dollars to make a movie, Corman replied he would give him \$750,000.

Gray has not yet decided what the topic of her third book is going to be, although it might lean more towards a broader film history focus than another individual showbiz personality. Meanwhile, she is keeping busy with occasional journalistic assignment for publications such as *The Hollywood Reporter* and an ongoing teaching assignment at UCLA Extension, where her current mid-level screenwriting class is slated to continue through the Spring and Summer semesters.

Although the back cover for *Blood-Sucking Vampires* features a prominent quote from screenwriter Chuck Griffith, who worked with Corman on films such as *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Death Race 2000*, Gray is refreshingly frank about his take on the duality of Corman and other aspects of the new edition.

“Chuck is bitter, so I’d be very careful with that, because he’s got some reasons to be angry,” Gray suggests. “Also, the photographs [inside the book] are different from the 2000 version, which as far as I’m concerned is a little unfortunate. I liked what I had, which were a lot of home photos and baby pictures and things like that. Now there are more Vincent Price in makeup photos, so it’s quite a different mix.”

With Corman showing no signs of slowing down – Tom Cruise and Paula Wagner have purchased the remake rights for *Death Race 2000* and Corman is reportedly talking to producer Neil Moritz about a new version of Ron Howard’s 1977 effort *Grant Theft Auto* - he is in many ways one of the elder statesman of that grand old game of Hollywood self-promotion.

“I was in the office once for one of the oddest things you could ever see,” remembers Gray. “GQ, or a magazine of that nature, asked him if he had any hobbies or interests that were unexpected. I guess he racked his brain and said that years ago, when he was living in Europe, he would take dates to the ballet.”

“So they put out this article out that said, Shocker! Roger Corman likes ballet, and they actually got some ballerinas in full *Swan Lake* get-ups to come in and pose on his desk, while he sat there looking intellectual and amused,” she continues. “He literally had ballerinas on pointe on his desk. So you never knew quite what you were going to see when you came to work.”

Editor’s Note: Gray appears March 11th, 7:30 pm, at Borders Books on State Street in Santa Barbara; March 24th at Barnes & Noble in Encino; and April 19th at Barnes & Noble in Manhattan Beach. For more information, please visit beverlygray.com.

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Fan Quentin Tarantino

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