

Member Interview

Six Questions with Sydney Ladensohn Stern

What is your current project and at what stage is it?

The Brothers Mankiewicz: Hope, Heartbreak, and Hollywood Classics, the first dual biography of screenwriter brothers Herman and Joseph L. Mankiewicz. It was just published by the University Press of Mississippi's Hollywood Legends Series and is getting reviewed and excerpted now.

What person would you most like to write about?

I have another subject but I don't want to tell yet. I like writing about complicated, creative people and after Gloria Steinem I worried that I wouldn't find another subject as complex. However, the Mankiewicz brothers were just as complicated and contradictory, and with two of them, each complicated in his own way, it doubled the fun.



Sydney Ladensohn Stern is on the steering committee of the NYU Biography Seminar and chairs the steering committee of [Women Writing Women's Lives \(WWWL\)](#). Her previous biography was *Gloria Steinem: Her Passions, Politics, and Mystique*.

juggling than I had expected, because I didn't want to confuse the reader when I went back and forth between them. Herman and Joe were in the same business and usually lived in the same city, but they really lived two separate and complete lives that I somehow had to weave into one narrative.

What have been your most frustrating moments?

For this book, structure also resolved my greatest frustration. By far my biggest challenge was the disparity in material for the two brothers. Joe lived to be almost 84. He died in 1993, so there were plenty

Who is your favorite biographer or what is your favorite biography?

I'm not getting near that one in this company! But one I remember well, because it kept me up practically all night, is Lyndall Gordon's *Lives Like Loaded Guns* (2010). That biography of Emily Dickinson was scholarly and at the same time so riveting that I couldn't stop until I found out what happened in the struggle between Dickinson's brother's wife and his mistress for posthumous control of her poetry.

What have been your most satisfying moments as a biographer?

My most satisfying moment each time has been figuring out my book's structure. Biography offers us the chronology of our subjects' lives, but there are always decisions about what to include and where to put it. Once I figure out how to structure the entire story, I have the weird sense that it was there all the time and I just had to discover it. Two protagonists required more

of interview subjects still alive. I had access to his diaries and private papers at his widow's house, his collected papers at the Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences'] Margaret Herrick Library, and a large collection of his previous biographer's interviews given to me by the biographer. Besides plentiful sources, Joe's life offered rich material: he was married three times, had famous mistresses like Joan Crawford and Judy Garland, and made about 15 very good movies. By contrast, Herman was not quite 55 when he died in 1953, so I had only a few people to interview, some letters, and an overload of famous, much-told, fourth-hand anecdotes. Furthermore, not only did Herman have only one wife and no apparent mistresses, he had 30 fewer years of life and far fewer important films. He did have a few dissipations, but they were the same ones over and over (drinking, gambling, getting himself fired), rather than new, interesting mistresses. I had a contract to write a biography of two subjects, not a subject and a sidekick, and more than once I was convinced there was no way I could make it work. Again, structure came to the rescue.

One research/marketing/attitudinal tip to share?

Research: approach your subject's world with humility. Every time I started a book, certain themes would emerge from my interviews, but they seemed to be so self-evident that I paid them little attention. Once I went deeper, I would realize they were crucial information. I hope next time I'll listen more closely, because that common wisdom right there in front of me was actually the tip of the iceberg. My job was to excavate the rest.

Marketing: Social media—learn it. I kept hearing that we should use Twitter even while writing, but I already wasted too much time on Facebook and email. Then the book was published and the first time I saw a positive tweet, I had to jump in and learn on the spot. Trying to figure out whether I was supposed to like, reply, forward, or retweet, I also came across a piece about Twitter etiquette. So now, besides everything else, I sometimes wonder if I'm being Twitter-rude. Fortunately, I have no idea.