

## Episode #8 Show Notes: More Time with Ms. Harlow

I thought I was ready to say goodbye to Jean Harlow at the close of Episode 7. It turns out that there's more to see here and more to say. Since Episode 7 dropped a couple of weeks ago, I read Harlow's novel *Today is Tonight*. Great literature it is not. The storyline is, well, pretty kooky. The writing is amateur, like something a gifted teenage girl with romantic notions my pen in her journal. Harlow attempted—and not successfully—to give her heroine, Judy Lansdowne, some dimension by peppering the narrative with stream-of-consciousness passages aimed at disclosing Judy's innermost thoughts. All of the characters, however—including Judy—seem to be of a flat stock. The dialogue sounded as if it were pulled from a Harlow movie script, full of sarcasm and a cadence characteristic of the era in which it was written. Yes, you could list a number of things wrong with this book. And yet—dare I admit it?—it was entertaining. I suppose *Today is Tonight* is a classic study of a book “so bad it's good.” It took a turn I should have expected and should have been able to detect from a mile away—but instead I found myself surprised. Most interesting, however, is what I believe to be the autobiographical nature of the book. The choices her heroine makes, her responses to a steep downward spiral in her circumstances, and her assessment and handling of the men in her life, reveal something about Harlow *the woman* that is never hinted at in interview of Harlow *the star*. So, before we leave Ms. Harlow for good, let's visit her one last time and catch a fading glimpse of her glamorous and storied life.

  
~ Jennifer Passariello, Circa 19xx

### *Today is Tonight: Context*

Jean Harlow's agent, Arthur Landau, wrote the forward to *Today is Tonight*. It's included here because he was her friend, and as such, he offers a unique perspective on Jean's motivation to write, as well as what shaped the story depicted in her novel.

During my association with Jean Harlow, I was fortunate, both as her agent and as her intimate friend, to know her as few people ever have the opportunity to know a Hollywood film star. I use the word “star” in the Hollywood sense, because that characterization of Jean probably generated more of her personal unhappiness than did any other factor in her life.

Jean Harlow was a Hollywood star, but more than anything else, she wanted to be a true performer and creative person. Neither the studios which employed her nor the people who purchased tickets to see her perform ever gave her the chance to discover whether or not she could become a *true* performer. In her private life, Jean was an introvert given to introspection, music, and reading. At the studios and on stage, Jean was an extrovert, for that was the role she had to play.

*Today is Tonight* was a manifestation of her desire to *create*, as distinguished from merely *performing*. Its genesis occurred in a peculiar way. One day in 1933 or 1934—the exact date escapes me, and I did not compile a written chronology of the events—Jean called me and asked me to meet her at the studio where she was then filming a picture for MGM. During that meeting, she informed me that she intended to write a book. When I questioned her as to her ability to devise and prepare a story for such a manuscript she stated that the story came to her, virtually complete, in a dream and that the dream had created in her a compelling urgency to write the story. Jean and I had several more conversations during the laborious preparation of her manuscript, during which I gave my constant assurances that I would help her in any way I could.

After the manuscript was completed, nothing was done with it during Jean's lifetime. It lay dormant, treasured only as an interesting memento, until after Jean's death, when her mother sold the motion picture rights to the manuscript to MGM, reserving publication rights. After Mrs. Bello [Jean's mother] died, the publication rights to the manuscript passed to Mrs. Ruth Hamp who, with her husband, was one of Jean's closest friends.

Because of the renewed interest in Jean Harlow, life and her death, her victories and her defeats, and after long conversations with Mrs. Hamp, it was finally decided by her that the time had come to publish the manuscript in an effort to help Jean's friends and the reading public in general to understand that Jean, although a victim, possibly of many things beyond her control and beyond the control of any human protection, wanted more than anything else to be a creative person, and did have a mind and a depth of understanding which surpassed the superficial characterizations she performed on the screen.

~Arthur Landau

## Today is Tonight: The Plotline

*Today is Tonight* takes place in the 1920s in the glamorous period right before the bottom fell out of the economy in response to the stock market crash. As the book opens, we observe the main characters living a life of decadence and leisure. However, soon tragedy befalls them, and from there on out the story centers on the characters' response to that tragedy and their survival in the new normal of the Great Depression.

This opening passage below is characteristic of Harlow's writing style throughout the novel.

*Something is tickling my nose. Something yellow. It must be the sheet—*

She raised a pale brown hand, which felt strangely ownerless, and flicked away the corner of the yellow sheet which had fluttered across her face. It was a satin sheet, the color of a pale young begonia bud.

*That was a good tan I had this summer. I'm still a bit brown. Yes. Quite brown compared with the white below the bathing suit line. Even that isn't as white as I really am. Funny that a man should want you tanned all over. No. It isn't funny. I like it. And the oil feels so—so wicked on your skin. No wonder those SOUTH SEA ISLAND trollops are—*

She could not finish the sentence, even mentally. She was completely relaxed. Even when she thought of herself, it was like considering another person.

*Where's my nightgown? Oh, yes—down there by my feet. And it cost Fifty-five dollars. It looked like an evening gown—but not now. Maybe that's why—*

Without turning her head she became aware of something on the pillow next to hers.

*That'll be three orchids. There were two a year ago today, and one the year before that. But I can't be bothered now. Later I'll look. Shall I sleep or shall I think? I can't sleep yet. And I'm thinking without wanting to. Shall I put my nightie on? Why should I? There's no-body to see me—and if there were—*

She smiled in a sudden flush of reminiscence. Recent reminiscence.

*If I go to sleep, I know I won't dream about anything as nice as I'm thinking about. I like to sleep. I love to sleep. I have to sleep a lot. But not now—*

Throughout the novel Harlow employs the use of stream-of-consciousness monologues to give us a glimpse of Judy's interior life and the psychology behind her responses to the events around her.

She does not necessarily use this device to good effect; we don't really learn anything of value about Judy from these passages. The characters in this story are generally flat.

Harlow's writing style was heavily influenced by her films, which tended to feature clipped, interrupted and overlapping dialogue. Even in these opening paragraphs we can see the interrupted or "clipped" nature of Judy's thinking patterns. Em dashes signify an interrupted through.

*Today is Tonight*: What one critic had to say

Harlow's book was published in 1965, and I was unable to find much press about it from that period—or any other period, for that matter. It seems *Today is Tonight* is a forgotten book that was never fully remembered. I was able to find one article from a 1965 issue of the *New York Times* about it. The critic is a man name Richard Lingeman, and he doesn't appear to have taken Harlow's book very seriously. At one point, he does ask the question, "Did Jean Harlow really write this competently-plotted pastiche of Elinor Glyn, Jean Harlow movies, and all the romantic *Saturday Evening Post* fiction of the twenties and thirties?"

A competent-plotted pastiche? While Lingeman seemed to poke fun at the book, he seems to give the plot more credit than I do. But was it a pastiche of Jean Harlow movies? Yes, definitely.

"Consider [*Today is Tonight*] a mental movie," he writes. "It should be read, if at all, in a spirit of motion picture reverie."

"First: darken your mind. Next, hold a mental screening of some simple-minded, flip, sexy, chromium-plated Thirties Modern comedies. As the images drift through your anodized brain, pick up a copy of *Today is Tonight*, grab a handful of popcorn, and turn the pages slowly, reading a snatch here and there and not troubling yourself with the story."

He goes on to say that "A psychiatrist might make something of the Lady Godiva theme. The author has Judy insist several times that even though performing nude, she is triumphantly innocent, while the spectators are either dirty-minded or morbidly curious. This plea, coming as it does from America's leading sex symbol from the Thirties reveals a certain defensiveness."

### Close Your Eyes and Begin Reading

TODAY IS TONIGHT. By Jean Harlow. New York: Grove Press, 271 pp., cloth, \$5. Dull Publishing Company, 225 pp., paper, 40 cents.

By RICHARD R. LINGEMAN

#### HARLOW WRITES!?

COMING! JEAN HARLOW IN HER MOST ROMANTIC ROLE!

Grove Press, who gave you Henry Miller and Hubert Selby, presents, in conjunction with Joseph E. Levine and the current craze for old movies, a New Star in the Literary Firmament—

#### JEAN HARLOW'S TODAY IS TONIGHT.

Romance! ("The surf surged and ebbed in perfect time with the soft notes of the music drifting from the house. Oblivious to all but the looser pulsation of their own bodies, Judy and Peter lay in each other's arms.")

Tears! ("Not going to see any more? . . . Why, you're lucky, Peter! . . . I'm going to be a pair of spectacles for you to see the things that will make this funny old world look like an eight-dollar heaven wrapped up in pink ribbon and delivered to the front door.")

Tragedy! ("But bluntly, Judy—a tidal wave has hit Wall Street, and you and I—and Peter—are just bodies washed up in the sand!")

Spunk! ("Judy looked at the stranger with such cool eyes that the latter hurriedly repealed her liberality of thought. There were some women in the world who didn't have to have money to be 'classy.'")

Heroism! ("I've got a job. I'm doing newspaper work. I write a daily column, 'Broadway by a Blind Man.' Judy, it's—it's swell!")

Well, all this is—*is* swell, to use the author's favorite word, but don't regard Jean Harlow's putative novel—from which the quotes above are wrenched—as a book; consider it a mental movie. It should be read, if at all, in a spirit of motion-picture reverie.

First: darken your mind. Next, hold a mental screening of some simple-minded, flip, sexy, chromium-plated Thirties Modern comedies. As the images drift through your anodized brain, pick up a copy of "Today is Tonight," grab a handful of popcorn, while a merry thirties tune ("We're in the Money" might be nice), and turn the pages slowly, reading a snatch here and there and not troubling yourself with the story. Or better still, take the book to the next Jean Harlow Festival at the New Yorker Theater and read it in total darkness while watching the movie. Man—that's real Camp.

If you must know, author Harlow's plot entangles the reader unwillingly

A freelance humorist and exocentric editor of *Monocle* magazine, Mr. Lingeman is currently writing a book on American social history.

"Untrammeled romantic fantasy."

Jean Harlow in a scene from "Today is Tonight."

in the lives of some horsey Long Island people named Judy (Jean Harlow), her broker husband, Peter (Francois Tonne), and Peter's partner Bill (Warner Baxter). Peter falls off one of those horses, implausibly fracturing his thick skull, and goes blind.

The Depression nort happens to them, and the rest of the book is taken up with Judy's efforts to earn a living by doing a Lady Godiva act in a nightclub, with Peter's efforts to find out where the hell his wife has been going nights (she tricked him into thinking it was day; hence, the title) and, oh yes, to regain his Self Respect; and with Bill's efforts to keep his hands off Judy. Whether the novel itself is awful enough to be good—that is to say, Camp—I leave to the Camp followers of Susan Sontag.

Did Jean Harlow really write this competently-plotted pastiche of Elinor Glyn, Jean Harlow movies, and all the romantic Saturday Evening Post fiction of the twenties and thirties? If one accepts the definitive biography by Irving Shulman, Ph.D. candidate, as veracious, one wonders how she found the time.

In Ezra Goodman's introduction to the Grove Press edition, a conciliatory attempt is made to determine the book's authorship. Arthur Landa, who was Harlow's agent, told Mr. Goodman that the idea came to Jean in a dream and that she secured the professional help of her writer-producer friend Carey Wilson in setting it down on paper. The only witness to Jean in the physical act of composition is Carmelita O'Grady Wilson, Carey Wilson's widow, who told Mr. Goodman: "They worked at night after we were married. . . . They dictated it right in front of me. Jean dictated a lot of the dialogue. . . . Jean was married to Hal Rosson at the time and he sometimes came over in the evening while they dictated and worked together. . . . It took about eight months or so to write."

Mr. and Mrs. Wilson were married

on May 6, 1934. Their wedding attracted more than the usual notice because Jean attended it sans husband. The next day she announced officially (i.e., told Luella Parsons) her separation and intention to get a divorce from Hal Rosson, her third husband, to whom she had been married eight months. It seems doubtful that Rosson would have "sometimes" joined the collaborators at work after his separation from Jean, especially since he was bedridden by a pneumonia attack only six weeks later; however, the discrepancy could be explained as an understandable lapse of memory over a 30-year span by Mrs. Wilson.

At any rate, the novel never was published while Jean Harlow was alive. The literary rights were passed through her mother to Ruth Hemp, who sold them to Grove, who brought out the book just in time to deepen and quicken our appreciation of Joseph E. Levine's current cinematic tribute to Miss Harlow, now playing, etc.

Who's to say positively that Jean Harlow didn't have a collaborative hand in "Today is Tonight," and that the book is not an authentic object of Pop Americana? However, don't expect to find, lurking between the lines, the dark revelations that Mr. Shulman so ripely detailed in his "Harlow." The book is untrammeled romantic fantasy, lit spatteringly by flippant, good-bested glimmers of wit and permeated with gush.

A psychiatrist might make something of the Lady Godiva theme. The author has Judy insist several times that even though performing nude, she is triumphantly innocent, while the spectators are either dirty-minded or morbidly curious. This plea, coming as it does from America's leading sex symbol of the thirties, reveals a certain defensiveness. At any rate, if "Today is Tonight" reveals anything, it reveals not what Jean Harlow was, but the society-belle-cum-heroic-life-wife she wished she could be. If that is of interest.



The New York Times  
Published: August 8, 1965  
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## About the ankle bracelet..

Judy Lansdowne's ankle bracelet of dainty little pearls played an important role in *Today is Tonight*; it was the identifier that confirmed Judy's true identity as she masqueraded on stage in the role of Lady Godiva. Was an ankle bracelet an unusual choice of accessory in the 1930s? Not really. In fact Jean Harlow famously wore one on her left ankle. A quick Google search will call up scores of photos of her wearing it. Hers was a thin platinum chain.

There is some lore attached to Harlow's ankle bracelet; several online blog posts state that Harlow considered the bracelet a lucky charm (apparently she owned two "lucky charms": the anklet and a special mirror). If so, hers was a misplaced faith; she was anything *but* lucky. There is also some speculation as to where she got the bracelet. Some have suggested it was a gift to her from the mobster "Bugsy" Siegel; others claim it was her husband Paul Bern who gave it to her when they were dating. Of course, she could have purchased the bracelet herself.



Here is a low resolution photo of Harlow wearing her ankle bracelet.

Harlow's attachment to her ankle bracelet may have been due to its symbol for youthful rebellion. In the book *Platinum Girl* by Eve Golden, one of Harlow's childhood friends explained that Jean was disciplined at her prep school for wearing an ankle bracelet. "Several of us wore them, but exception had to be taken," her friend stated. Furious, Jean packed her bags, ready to leave the school. Her friend calmed her down and she stayed.



Jean Harlow's charm bracelet. It sold in 2006 for \$3,840.

There doesn't seem to be any record of what happened to Harlow's platinum anklet. Was she buried with it? Possibly. But, I did find a super cute charm bracelet of hers that had come up for auction at Christie's a few years ago. The charms were given to her by her co-stars over the years: the telephone was from Clark Gable, the microphone & film projector from Louis B. Mayer, the dog, fan, water wagon, fireman's hat, thermometer, and toilet from William Powell. It also included a key, mailbox, and cup with *BABY* (Harlow's nickname) engraved on it.

## Saratoga

*Saratoga* was Jean Harlow's last film. In it, she played Carol Clayton, engaged to a millionaire, who tries to get the deed to her family's farm back from a bookie (played by Clark Gable), who was given the deed to the farm in payment for Carol's father's gambling debts. The story itself is not that enthralling; most people who see this film

are distracted by the true-life story going on in the background: Harlow's illness and eventual death. While the film was *nearly* completed at that time, there were still some scenes that still needed to be shot. This put the studio, MGM, in a difficult position. Louis B Mayer made the following statement to the *Los Angeles Times*:

The story *Saratoga* in the form it was photographed up to this time is no more. In accordance with our policy, it was written for two distinct, strong personalities, Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. Jean Harlow has passed on. Therefore production on the picture will be indefinitely delayed until we can rewrite the story to fit some other feminine personality. All that has been photographed to date, and we were within a week of the picture's completion, will be scrapped.

*But*, Jean Harlow's fans demanded the film be released with Harlow in it, so the studio set about reworking the script a bit and found an actress, Mary Dees, to step in as her double in a handful of remaining scenes.



Jean Harlow



Mary Dees

### [Favorite Thing of the Week](#)

This week's Favorite Thing is a super cute faux tortoise shell link necklace I picked up at my local Dillards Department Store earlier this week. I love tortoise shell. It's an elevated neutral classic that you can wear with everything—which would make it a great signature necklace (and hey, I've never had a "signature" anything—so maybe now I do!). Something surprising about this necklace: it's from *Southern Living*, the brand I most associate with the home décor magazine. So...apparently they have a line of jewelry now?