Marriage is not a word,” actor Eddie Cantor once declared. “It’s a sentence.”

The most important event in the lives of millions of people, marriage, even at it’s best, as Cantor implied, is often filled with daily responsibilities and tedium.

For moviemakers, according to Jeanine Basinger, it has been a nightmare. Because Americans like freedom, adventure, and action, the chase, not the capture, the unknown, not the known, she points out, producers and publicists avoided the label marriage, and screenwriters struggled to create a problem “that might threaten, destroy, undermine, question or somehow subvert the status of wedded bliss.” And to solve it, somehow, some way, so that the couple could live happily ever after. Off screen.

In “I Do And I Don’t,” Basinger, a professor of film studies at Wesleyan University and the author of “A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960,” “Silent Stars,” and “The Star Machine,” provides a fascinating survey of how Hollywood has told the story of marriage. Analyzing the content of hundreds of films from the silent era, the heyday of the studio system, and the contemporary age, she demonstrates that marriage has remained in “an untenable plot position”: While the movies can credibly present courtship as a battlefield, they invariably portray marriage “as a field of dead bodies after the war is won.”

The real fun in “I Do And I Don’t,” however, comes from the splendidly crafted, creative, and compelling critiques that make you want to see many movies again or for the first time. “The Painted Veil” featured Greta Garbo, decked out in an Asian-style turban, stepping out into “the dark and velvety night,” where Chinese fire dragons, gongs, glitter, a sun god with a naked chest and long fingernails, and, “of course, George Brent,” are waiting, she writes. That film epitomized how adultery was presented to audiences in the 1930s: “inside a tale of erotic, exotic escapism.”

Alice Faye, Basinger admits, was no great shakes as a dancer and “seemed passive, even immobilized in the frame.” But as she sang the World War II wife’s lament, “No Love, No Nothin’” in “The Gang’s All Here,” “she didn’t just tug on heartstrings; she ripped out guts and furthermore made anyone who was cheating feel guilty as hell.”

As a bonus prize inside her Cracker Jack box of a book, Basinger also compares marriage movies and 1950s TV sitcoms. Despite happy endings, she reminds us, monsters lurked close to the surface of movies; beneath sitcoms, where marriage was de-sexed and familial problems easily solved, “lurked the sponsors.”

Over the past half century, Basinger concludes, moviemakers have been less interested in the subject of marriage. Her explanation — that the institution has “become increasingly socially irrelevant” and “[e]veryone lost interest in the events of married life” — is almost certainly an overstatement. After all, while about half of the marriages in the United States end in divorce, Americans are quicker than adults in other countries to reconnect and remarry. And most young people who declare that marriage is obsolete also say they intend to tie the knot.

But Basinger is surely right that, recently, marriage movies have gone nuclear. With spouses in “The War of the Roses” (1989) and “Mr. and Mrs. Smith” (2005) literally shooting at one another, it’s hard to argue, moreover, with her prediction that marriage movies are headed toward “no resolution, no closure, no reassurance, and, finally, no explanation.” And that although marriage is a story that can’t really be told, Hollywood is likely to “try to tell it anyway.”

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