

Local journalist, critic amasses fame, awards

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Chicago critic and journalist Jan Lisa Huttner recently earned her third Silver Feather Award for writing the most award-winning articles in the Illinois Woman's Press Association (IWPA) annual Mate E. Palmer Communications Contest. Huttner is well known for her writing about women in the film industry and Jewish Culture.

Every month, Huttner writes a regular column on arts and culture for the JUF News, which is Chicago's large Jewish monthly, and film reviews for the San Francisco-based Web site WomenArts. She also freelances, posts on her blog The Hot Pink Pen and runs a Web site called Films for Two: The Online Guide for Busy Couples with her husband Richard Miller, the University of Chicago (U. of C.) Medical Center's financial controller.

This year, Huttner won three first-place awards, four second-place awards, two-third place awards and four honorable mentions for 13 features, interviews and speeches she wrote for newspapers, Web sites and her blog.

Huttner, who is an advocate for the film industry utilizing and recognizing more women as directors and lead characters in film, said, "Some people have rhythm and blues, I have women and Jews."

Huttner's knack for writing about women and Jews has made her a winner of several IWPA awards since 2004.

The IWPA judges said Huttner has a great way of "interweaving opinion, observation and interviews with fascinating artists and thinkers. As a columnist she has a point of view, yet the voices of her subjects are captured well."

Huttner, who meets her husband for dinner at Park 52 every second and fourth Friday before going to worship at K.A.M. Isaiah Israel, said the force behind her writing and advocacy work has come from her own experiences as a Jewish woman.

"I was a charter subscriber to Ms. Magazine in the '60s," said Huttner, who says she has always been a feminist. "On the U. of C. campus there were no women in the philosophy department when I was in grad school and it was the same when I worked at Pete Marwick, public accounting consulting firm."

Having fought her way to a management position in a workforce of mostly men — many who did not like having a woman as their manager — Huttner learned from the other small number of women executives how to navigate in the male majority corporate world. After 20 years as a consultant, she decided to leave the firm because it was taking a toll on the physical health of her family.

"We weren't eating the right things, being active enough or enjoying life," Huttner said.

One week after she left the firm, the World Trade Center was attacked.

Huttner said after the attacks she was concerned about the discrimination against Arabs and the complications with the Jewish community so she began to write articles including criticism of Israeli films.

"In some parts of the world Israelis are not viewed as human beings, so it's good to see someone in the films doing everyday things like cooking breakfast," Huttner said. "I am glad I can write about arts and culture to help humanize what people are quick to demonize."

Having also been known in her workplace as the go-to-person on what movie to take your wife to see, Huttner began critiquing mainstream films and newspapers soon picked up her columns. Huttner — along with the American Association of University Women Illinois — formed a movement called Women in the Audience Supporting Women Artists Now (WITHASWAN) a group that has made a pledge to see more films by women directors and screenwriters.

"I will be thrilled when at least a third of the films we watch have women as the director or the star," said Huttner who watches about 300 films a year and is a member of the Chicago Film Critics Association. "Things are getting better but we still have a long way to go."

In 2009, 113 million of the 217 million moviegoers were women while only 104 million were men. According to the Motion Picture Association of America, women directed only 7 percent of the top 250 grossing films and wrote 8 percent of the top 250 grossing films. According to the Center for the Study of Women in TV and Film at San

Diego State University, only two of the top 10 grossing films are women centric and nine of the top 50 grossing films were women centric — this number includes two animated films, "The Princess and the Frog" and "Coraline."

"Very early in our culture women and girls are expected to go to guy movies but men and boys are expected to stay away from so-called chick flicks," said Huttner.

She and Miller, who sees about 200 films a year, created Films for Two to combat that belief. On the Web site, which was started on Valentine's Day in 2002, the couple rate and recommend movies that are suitable for both sexes. Huttner said despite most women's preference for strong character

development in movies and most men's preference for stunts and explosives it's not hard for her and Miller to agree on what movie to see.

"We can watch the same movie and have totally different experiences," Huttner said. "We can both like the same movie but for different reasons and both hate the same movie but have different reasons."

In May, Huttner was one of 33 members to receive awards from the IWPA. The winning articles have been sent to the Women's Press Association's National Chapter and the winners will receive awards during the national conference, which will take place in Chicago in August.

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